



THE NAUGHTY LIST

Hollywood
HUMBUG

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLE CHRISTENSEN

Hollywood Humbug

KANE & SCARLET

ELLE CHRISTENSEN

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Editor: Rochelle Paige, Violet Rae

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Prologue



Christmas was supposed to be “the most wonderful time of the year.” However, it certainly didn’t seem like it based on the gloomy expressions of the people gathered in Studio 6 of Heart & Soul Studios. The owner, Julianna Kensington, had called for a meeting yesterday. She’d summoned the cast and crew for the studio’s newest movie—which was sprung on most of us by our agents. Considering the talent level in the room, I was pretty sure that, like me, these people had all agreed to this project as a favor or because of a deal they couldn’t refuse. Most of us would rather do anything besides a Christmas movie—hence the resentment percolating in the air.

My agent and PR rep, Della, was lucky I hadn’t fired her ass when I found out she had withheld the fact that Scarlett Cassidy was playing my “love interest” in the movie until I’d signed the contract. Although she’d made a good argument... one I couldn’t even remember now. And I was the idiot who’d blindly agreed without knowing all the details, which I wouldn’t have done if Julianna hadn’t called me and asked me to do it as a favor to her.

Julianna and I had been close ever since she hired me for my first leading role—the one that broke me out of the teen heartthrob image I’d been pigeonholed into. She’d been a great friend and mentor over the years, which made it impossible for me to say no. Ultimately, I wouldn’t have let Julianna down if I’d known about Scarlet beforehand. That didn’t mean I hadn’t been very clear that she owed me big time.

She'd just chuckled and told me more about the project. Two weeks ago, a well-respected Hollywood writer named Nick Saint had approached Julianna to pitch his film, *The Naughty List*. He wanted it filmed on a ridiculously short timeline—which I didn't understand, but she'd said his reasons were not hers to tell. As the Heart & Soul Studios owner, it was her job to sign off on the movie.

Like the rest of us, she was initially reluctant, what with the filming being so close to Christmas. When she told me he offered an obscene amount of money and wished to donate his portion of the revenue to charity, I understood why she'd agreed. Although, I suspected there was something else to her decision that she wasn't sharing.

I questioned why she wanted me when I was such a scrooge and loathed the holiday. She told me he'd had one more request—he wanted to hand-pick most of the cast and crew. She'd been dubious at first, especially after seeing the exact list of people he wanted involved with the project.

I don't understand how he convinced her to agree because as I looked around the group of A-listers and top professionals in the industry, it was common knowledge that most of us weren't fans of Christmas. However, she'd decided it would be interesting to see if the festive spirit could work its magic and create some love connections and a “feel-good” Christmas movie.

What a load of bullshit. Christmas magic was nothing but a fairytale. I was wary of her comments about love connections until I learned about Scarlet's involvement. I knew then that Julianna wasn't talking about me. No one in their right mind would expect anything more between me and Scarlet than civil words—spoken only when there was no other choice.

I tried to discourage her, but Julianna was a romantic, and she adored Christmas. She'd laughed and told me all we needed was a little magic in our lives. After some coercing, she confessed that Nick Saint seemed to know a lot about this eclectic group, even though he was adamant he'd met none of us. I'd met him when I signed the contract, and a twinkle in his eye made me think of Santa Claus, even though the man didn't

resemble him in any other way—other than his name being so close to St. Nick.

Standing at the front of the studio with the cast and crew gathered around her, she smiled brightly, a similar twinkle now in her eyes.

Some of us sat while others stood, arms crossed, shifting uncomfortably on their feet. Looking around the group, with the body language and many sour expressions, you'd think Julianna had called us all to a funeral.

However, despite the chilly vibes emanating from some of the people gathered in the studio, there were almost tangible sparks of chemistry between several of them.

Julianna smoothed her hands down her designer pantsuit and cleared her throat. "Thank you, everyone, for coming on such short notice. I know it's asking a lot this close to Christmas, but this movie is important for studio revenue, and a large percentage of the profits will go to charity. I think we can all agree it feels good to spread a little magic during the holidays, and our movie *The Naughty List* truly reflects this sentiment."

She paused and looked around at the glum faces. "Perhaps we should rename the movie *Hollywood Humbug*," she teased. She paused and looked around at all the glum faces. When no one cracked a smile, she rolled her eyes. "You grinchies are in need of a little Christmas magic."

I snorted in derision, receiving a glare from Julianna, but it didn't have its usual effect on me. I was too furious. Typically, I was laid-back, quick with a smile, and easy to work with. But right then, I sat with my arms folded over my broad chest, my fingers drumming on my firm biceps as I attempted to ignore the leggy blonde beside me.

Scarlett fucking Cassidy. The woman playing my leading lady. Because the universe wanted to fuck with me.

She turned her head in my direction and glared at me. I could practically feel her unique turquoise eyes shooting sparks.

Well, tough shit. Scarlet was the most significant cause of my grumpy attitude and tension anyway. So I gave her a bored glance, then looked back toward my boss.

“It’s great that some of you have worked together before, which will make things flow much more smoothly on our limited timescale. And I’m sure those with any... *differences*”—Julianna looked pointedly between me and Scarlett—“will put them aside for the sake of this movie.”

“Differences. Right. One of us is a mature adult, and the other is a childish pain in the ass,” Scarlett muttered under her breath, and I clenched my jaw to bite back a scathing retort.

Julianna rolled her eyes, then went back to addressing the entire group. “You’re all professionals, so you know the drill. We’ll hit the ground running this afternoon and work through Christmas Eve. As the director, Luca will run the show.” She nodded toward the tall, muscular man with a thick head of dark hair dressed in black. “You’ve all heard that Bryce’s wife went into labor. I heard from him yesterday, and she successfully delivered twin girls. They’re a little early but doing just fine.” There was a smattering of cheers and applause. “But that means we need a replacement for assistant director. Hailey Walker is coming in to fill the position. She arrives later today.”

Luca stepped forward to address the cast and crew. “Kane and Scarlett will start filming the first scene in a few hours. For anyone not involved in the scene, I’ll expect you on set at 8 AM sharp tomorrow.” His dark eyes narrowed as he scanned the room, and his tone brooked no argument. The man was a perfectionist, so I knew he’d create a masterpiece. As irritated as I was to be doing this movie, I’d always wanted to work with Luca, so I was looking forward to that aspect of this project.

“We’ll need you to coordinate the fight scene this afternoon, Jackson,” Julianna said, looking toward the large tattooed stunt coordinator.

“Not a problem,” he replied with a nod.

“Good. Laura and Abel, we won’t need you until tomorrow.” I looked between the other two leading actors in this film as they nodded at Julianna.

“More time to learn my lines,” Laura said, eyes sparkling and deep dimples on display as she grinned.

At least one person seems happy to be here, I thought begrudgingly. But then, Laura got along with everyone because she was sweet and fun.

“Lines? There are lines? In a movie?” Andrew—my body double—gasped in mock horror.

“Funny guy,” Abel grumbled, shooting the supporting actor a harsh look. I mentally jerked my chin up and down in solidarity. Abel was also here as a favor for a friend. However, he was bitter because the producers had fired him from the show he’d been starring in.

Andrew ignored Abel’s lack of humor. “Do you need my finely tuned body on set this afternoon?”

His tone was playful, and I sighed because, as much as I liked the guy, his cheery attitude—especially about Christmas—would most likely get on my nerves.

“Makes sense to have you here as you’re my body double,” I replied dryly before Julianna or Luca could answer.

I stopped paying attention after that. Instead, I focused on giving myself a silent pep talk about being a professional and not letting Scarlet get to me. This movie wasn’t the first time we’d worked together since we crashed and burned two years ago, but it was the first time we’d play opposite each other in a romantic storyline. I thought I’d let it go a long time ago, but then I would see her, and I felt anger and disappointment building inside me again. She—

“Well, I think that’s everything,” Julianna announced, regaining my attention. “Break a leg, everyone, and I expect to see you all at the wrap-up party at The Avalon Club on New Year’s Eve.”

Yeah, that wasn’t happening. No matter how many favors Julianna promised, I would not be attending that party.

Finishing a project was always a reason for celebrating, but this time, I would do it alone...well, not alone. A bottle of Scotch would keep me company as I rang in the new year.

Grabbing my jacket, I slipped it on, then moseyed over to say goodbye to Julianna. She'd walked over to Nick Saint, and they were talking softly. They didn't notice me as I approached, and when I heard Julianna's words, I stopped short.

"I wonder if we'll see some festive love matches among those present by the time the party rolls around," she murmured, clearly biting back a smile.

"Something tells me you will." Nick didn't bother trying to hide his amusement.

"Well, if we do, I will happily tip my hat to you." She sighed dreamily—shocking me because, as loving and kind as Julianna was, she was also a force to be reckoned with and didn't seem like the type to indulge in fairytales.

She smiled brightly at Nick. "There's nothing like celebrating the magic of Christmas with a good old-fashioned love story."

Nick's expression was cunning as he stepped closer to Julianna and gazed down at her upturned face. "I completely agree."

My brow rose, and my lips curled up into a grin. It seemed Nick had more than one ulterior motive for convincing Heart & Soul Studios to take on this movie. I decided not to interrupt their moment and turned to leave, briefly pausing when I saw Scarlet standing at the door, watching me with a puzzled expression. My smile flattened into a grim line as a scowl formed on my face. "Don't go meddling in their business," I grunted from a foot away.

Her eyes filled with irritation. "I have no intention to 'meddle' in anyone's business. That seems like something you would do, Jacob Marley."

My frown deepened. "Just because I hate this time of year doesn't mean I expect everyone else to be miserable. I will

ruin no one's Christmas, red.”

Scarlet scoffed, then gritted out through clenched teeth, “Don't call me red!” Tossing me one last glare, she stomped out the door before I could get another word out.

I sighed. This whole situation had disaster written all over it.

Merry fucking Christmas.

One



Two Years Ago

I didn't mix business with pleasure.

It was a rule I'd set for myself after a fling with another crew member went sideways, costing me millions to make sure the mess was cleaned up and swept under the rug.

Scarlet Cassidy was the only woman who tempted me to break my rule in the last ten years.

I sat in my chair on set and watched her work, something I did a lot of every time we worked together.

She was tall, with legs that went on for days, enormous turquoise eyes fringed with thick, dark lashes, and a mouth that made every woman in Hollywood jealous. Even the best plastic surgeon couldn't give someone a mouth that perfect. She had the slender build of a runner, yet she still had curves in all the right places. Her long, white-blonde hair cascaded down one shoulder, creating a bright, silky waterfall that rested over her right breast and ended near her waist. Scarlett exuded confidence and possessed an almost regal presence, epitomizing class. However, she adorned the shells of both ears with tiny sparkling studs, and rumors circulated about her having multiple tattoos in undisclosed areas, leaving everyone to wonder where they were since she employed body doubles for any nudity. Some assholes out there tried to use it to paint her as trashy, but to most people, it added to her depth of character, a quirk that seemed to make her more real and

relatable. Besides, her fans had a great time speculating about her tattoos, guessing where and what they were.

Her talent had blown me away the first time I saw her perform on stage in New York a year ago, and I had hoped to work with her eventually. Not even a month later, I received an offer for a part in a movie she had signed onto, and I eagerly accepted.

When we finally met in person, I was stunned by my physical reaction to her. Like all other men with a pulse, I'd found her attractive and captivating, but I hadn't expected the level of attraction that slammed into me. Cue the temptation to throw my convictions out the fucking window.

She was a talented actress, so she was a master at hiding her emotions, but it boosted my ego when I caught the flicker of desire in her eyes before she concealed it.

If it hadn't been portraying enemies, I probably wouldn't have been able to stop myself from asking her out. But I used it as an excuse—albeit thin—to convince myself that I wouldn't be able to hide my feelings for her. Complete bullshit, of course. If true, people wouldn't pay me millions to act in their projects. But I clung to the lie like a lifeline, determined to ask her out the day we finished filming.

Unfortunately, about a month before we were done filming, unbeknownst to either of us at the time, we were offered roles in the same movie. Parts that we accepted. When I received the script with the list of cast members, I punched a hole through my kitchen wall. I wanted to work with her again, but it meant waiting even longer to pursue her. How would I get through four more months of filming without giving in to my hunger for her? To make matters even fucking worse, our characters, though supporting roles, had their own romantic storyline.

I was determined to keep it to myself like I'd been doing so far, but then my best friend, August Zane, came to town. He was a singer—a multi-platinum rockstar—so we rarely got to see each other in person. But he was on tour, so when he came to L.A. for a series of shows, he stayed with me. Sensing that I

was bottling shit up, he suggested we head to our favorite bar, then dragged the whole story out of me.

“I don’t know if I can make it until the end of this project,” I groaned, dropping my forehead onto the cool, wooden table we were sitting at. Damn, I was pathetic.

“I only know Scarlet by reputation,” he murmured before draining his beer and signaling to our server for another. “It’s rock solid...but even so...Kayla seemed pretty level-headed initially.”

I knew where he was going and sat up, shaking my head. “That was different. Kayla pursued me, then tried to get rich by staging a dramatic breakup based on lies, which ended up costing me twenty million just to shut her ass up and stop the scandal before it hit.” Not only did I have to pay Kayla to sign an NDA, but I’d also been forced to pay off the “reporter” who’d agreed to print the story. I was using the term reporter loosely. Mandi Donovan was a bitch who made it her mission in life to print as much bullshit and gossip in her rag, *Star Watch*, as possible.

“How do you know it’s different?” he asked as he nodded at the waitress and took his fresh beer from her tray.

“Scarlet has shown some interest in me but never acted on it.”

“Are you sure she isn’t playing a long game, Kane? She might not be after money.”

“You think she wants to ride my coattails?” My tone was skeptical, but it wasn’t something that had never crossed my mind. I was only five years older than Scarlet, but I’d been in the industry since I was five and starred in the sitcom *A Boy Named Lancelot*. But she was a rising star...she didn’t need me to further her career. Right?

August was very cynical after years of being taken advantage of by friends and family. Rather than letting them get in trouble, he’d taken the blame for their exploits and ruined his reputation. Now, he struggled to keep himself from being blackballed in the music industry and didn’t trust easily.

So, I blamed his attitude on that, even though he'd tapped into questions and insecurities that were already there, though I'd buried deep.

"Wait it out, bro," August advised. "Get to know her better, and when the project is done, you can choose whether to pursue her."

"If you're going to be logical about shit..." I trailed off, and he smirked.

Fucking *finally*.

We'd wrapped up filming this morning, and I'd rushed through all of my finishing tasks, hoping Scarlet would still be on site so I didn't have to track her down.

She was just stepping out of the trailer she shared with two other cast members, carrying a small duffle. I jogged over and took the bag, giving her my most charming smile. "Let me help you with this."

Her perfect mouth parted, putting all kinds of naughty thoughts in my head, and she blinked up at me in surprise. Then her eyes dropped to my lips, and a pretty blush stole over her cheeks before she met my gaze again. I could understand her confusion. I'd treated her like a friend for the past year, and now I aimed my best panty-melting smile at her.

"Scarlet?"

"Hmmm?" I held back a laugh when she seemed to snap out of her dazed state suddenly. "Oh, um. You don't have to do that. It's not heavy, and my car is—"

"I know I don't *have* to," I interjected with a wink. "I want to."

"Oh...okay." She smiled softly, a side that she didn't show often. Scarlet was strong and dynamic, confident in who she was and her abilities, so when I made her blush and stammer, I

wanted to beat my chest in triumph. I also experienced a powerful wave of possessiveness that I hadn't known was in me.

We walked in silence for the few minutes it took to get to her car, and then I set her bag on the hood and crowded her up against the driver's side door. "I have a question to ask you, red."

She rolled her eyes at the nickname I'd given her during our first project together. She'd assumed it was because of her name since Scarlet was a shade of red, which annoyed her. But that was only part of it, and I wouldn't tell her the other reasons, which drove her up the wall. Somehow, she was both cute and sexy when riled up, so I kept using it.

"Are you ever going to tell me why you insist on calling me that?"

"That depends."

Her eyebrows shot up to her hairline. This was the first time I'd suggested I might one day tell her why.

I grinned, drawing her gaze to my mouth, causing her cheeks to redden. "Depends on what?" Her voice was a little breathless, and it went straight to my groin.

"On when you let me take you to dinner. I'll tell you then."

Scarlet smiled, and I was momentarily stunned by her beauty—something that happened frequently when she hit me with those perfect lips and straight, pearly white teeth. "How about tomorrow?"

I smirked as I raised an eyebrow. "You're that desperate to know why I call you red?"

Her cheeks bloomed with color, and I gently ran the tip of my finger over one. I fucking loved seeing her blush, and I was dying to know how far down it went.

"No. It's just that I leave for New York in two days to spend Christmas with my family. I don't,"—her entire face flushed as she continued—"I don't want to wait until after Christmas to go on a date with you."

My expression softened, and I cradled her face in my hands before leaning down to brush a much too chaste kiss over her lips. “Me either, baby. Tomorrow is perfect.”

Two



SCARLET

Kane Remington was lethal—the epitome of a Hollywood heartthrob. Tall, muscular, but lean—he played soccer whenever he got the chance—with short, dark blond hair, deep blue eyes, a chiseled jaw, and a diamond stud in his left ear. Not to mention the swoon-worthy smile that never failed to make my heart skip a beat and my cheeks heat. He was laid back, naturally suave, and he made me laugh. Who wouldn't be taken in by all that wit and charm?

However, for the last year, he'd never indicated that he was interested in more than friendship. There were moments when I thought I glimpsed a spark of desire, but they were gone so quickly that I convinced myself I'd imagined it. So, I kept my emotions hidden, only letting them show when it was called for on screen.

Which was why I was pretty fucking shocked when he pressed me up against my car and asked me on a date. And I didn't think twice before accepting.

He hadn't told me where he was taking me, so I picked out a little black dress that could be casual or fancy, depending on the accessories. It hugged my figure, dipped low in the back, and showed off just enough cleavage to make the girls look good without crossing into slutty. I left my hair down but pulled one side back with a sparkly clip, gave myself smoky eyes, and painted my lips with a pretty, pink gloss—one that didn't come off, which I hoped would come in handy later.

All my efforts were worth it when I opened the door, and Kane's dark blue orbs flared with desire as they scanned me

from head to toe. “Wow,” he uttered in a deep, raspy voice. It sent a shiver skittering down my spine.

“Hi.” I almost rolled my eyes at how breathless I sounded. For heaven’s sake, I was twenty-eight damn years old. Why was I acting like a freaking teenager?

Kane cleared his throat, pulling me from my thoughts. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, inviting him in with a wave as I moved back to give him room to enter. I led the way to my family room, which had a view of the mountains beyond the Olympic-sized pool and sand volleyball court. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll only be a minute.”

He smiled and winked at me, causing butterflies to erupt in my stomach. “Take your time, baby. We’re in no rush.”

I glanced back at him as I left the room and was momentarily stunned. He was removing his jacket, which made his green, button-down shirt stretch tight over his muscles. Then he turned to toss it on the couch, and I nearly swallowed my tongue. The slacks he was wearing gave me a fantastic view of his perfect ass. My cheeks were probably bright red as I quickly dashed to my bedroom before he turned back around and caught me ogling him.

After slipping on a pair of black suede stilettos, I added a white gold chain made from charms resembling feathers and matching dream catcher earrings with those same feathers hanging from them. Pleased with my reflection in the mirror, I grabbed a sparkly black clutch and returned to the living room.

He was staring through the glass French doors, and I smiled as I sidled beside him. “The view is one reason I bought this house.”

“The view here is absolutely gorgeous.” Something in his tone had me glancing up, only to find him staring down at me. His lips curved sensuously.

We stood there for a few minutes, the air thick with tension and the promise of passion. I was seconds away from climbing Kane like a tree when my cell phone rang, breaking the spell. I

pulled it out of my purse and cringed when I saw the goofy picture of my younger sister, Natalie, and me. Kane chuckled, and I shook my head, resigned to him seeing the ridiculous image.

Kane stopped me from answering by wrapping his long fingers around my wrist. Then he snatched my phone and answered with, “Scarlet will call you back.” He hung up, and my jaw dropped.

What just happened?

Before I could get an actual word out through my sputtering, he crossed his arms over his chest, keeping my phone tucked away, and stared me down. His expression was determined...but there was an amused twinkle in his eyes. “You can have it back once you’ve told me the story,” he informed me.

“Seriously?” I groaned.

“Seriously,” he replied as he plopped down on one of my forest-green couches and got comfortable.

I sighed, giving in because I knew he wouldn’t let it go.

“My sister, Natalie, and I were baking a massive batch of cookies for a charity event, and at one point, she slipped and fell on her ass”—I grinned at the memory—“while carrying a sack of flour. The bag exploded, and the contents went everywhere, but mostly covered my sister, making her look like the abominable snowman.” Kane chuckled, and the sound made my core tingle, but I refocused on the story in order to get it done and over with. I burst out laughing and grabbed my phone to ensure I captured the moment. Natalie glared at me and threatened to...let’s just say it involved spiders, and she was hitting below the belt. Still, I moved in closer to snap the picture but didn’t realize she could reach me until it was too late.” I gestured to where my phone was hidden. “As you can tell, she yanked on my apron, pulling me down next to her, then tossed a handful of flour in my face.”

Kane’s shoulders shook with laughter, and I put my hands in my back pockets, hoping he’d take that for the end of the

story.

“Not a chance,” he teased with a shake of his head. “There’s more to that picture.”

“Fine,” I grumbled. “A battle ensued until we both collapsed on the floor, completely exhausted and covered in white powder from head to toe.”

“Annnnd,” he prompted when I paused a little too long.

“Well, it was Christmas. And we’d been sipping hot toddies...” He waited patiently until I finally told him the rest. “We were a little tipsy, and I decided we needed to make snow angels. It was Natalie’s idea to strip down to our skivvies. She thought they’d turn out better if our clothes weren’t in the way.” Kane doubled over in laughter. “While we were doing it, our younger sister, Portia, snapped a photo.” My lips curled up into an evil smile. “Then we both threw flour at her until she was as covered in it as we were. She didn’t take it well since she had a date arriving thirty minutes later.”

Kane wiped tears from his cheeks before looking at me again. The warmth in his gaze made my stomach flutter and my heartbeat speed up. “I look forward to seeing that side of you, red.”

I pursed my lips and glared at him, although no heat was behind it. “Stop calling me, red. And there is no way in hell that you will ever see me like that. My parents have banned us from getting tipsy together, anyway.”

Kane raised an eyebrow, and I huffed. “You ski off the roof one time...”

“Stop,” Kane said, holding his hand in the air while his head hung down and his shoulders shook. “I can’t take anymore tonight.”

“Okay,” I said with a shrug.

He stood up and picked up his jacket, putting it on as he prowled over to me. “I’ll drag all of your stories out of you eventually, but I have a feeling they are going to scare the shit out of me, so we’ll space them out.”

“We’ll see,” I quipped, making him laugh again. “For right now, though. I’m *starving*.”

“We can’t have that. Why don’t you call your sister back when we’re in the car?” He suggested.

“Sure.” My heels clicked on the travertine tiles as I walked to the foyer and retrieved a shawl from the coat closet. Kane took it from me, then draped it over my shoulders before lacing his fingers through mine.

Once we were on the way to the restaurant, I checked the ten texts from my sister demanding to know who that was and what was going on, then pressed her name to call her back.

“Who the hell, A?” she screeched as soon as she picked up. “I’ve been freaking out!”

“Clearly,” I drawled.

“Seriously, A. Some guy answers your phone to tell me you can’t talk and then hangs up. I didn’t know if you were dead, or alive, or being killed, or if he was some guy playing secretary so he could give you multiple orgasms!”

Kane chuckled, and I sighed, realizing he could hear her yelling through the phone.

“Calm down, Nat. I’m sorry it freaked you out. It was a joke. He’s my...” I glanced at him for a second, unsure how to describe him. “Date,” I finished lamely.

“He sounded familiar.”

This thing between us was way too new to share with my busybody family, and Kane was a very private guy, so I hurried to answer so she wouldn’t dwell on why she recognized his voice. “You know how it is. Every guy in Hollywood sounds the same.”

Kane slanted a look my way, and I rolled my eyes as I covered the phone. “Do you really need your ego stroked?”

He shrugged, and I couldn’t help giggling. “You have the sexiest voice in Hollywood, Candy.”

He looked smug until I called him Candy, then his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Candy Kane,” I explained with a smug grin before returning to my conversation with my sister. “I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“I just wanted to make sure you packed the sexy, spandex panda suit and the slutty bunny costume. The one with the leash that—”

“Call you tomorrow,” I yelled over her. “Love you, byyyyyeeee!” Then I hung up and prayed that he hadn’t been paying attention.

No such luck. Kane glided to a stop at a red light and turned to look at me, his face speculative.

“What?” I asked causally.

He shook his head. “I’m trying to decide if I want her to be joking.”

“Excuse me?” I sputtered, dumbfounded.

The light turned green, and Kane flashed me a sexy grin before facing the road once more. “I don’t like the idea of you wearing anything like that for anyone else, but I can’t say I wouldn’t be intrigued to find those in your closet.”

I stared at him, cheeks flaming hot, mouth open, unsure what to think about his comment.

We arrived at the restaurant before I could respond, so I decided not to say anything and hoped he wouldn’t bring it up again. Especially since I kind of liked the idea of dressing up for him. Maybe not as a panda or bunny...I was going to kill Natalie.



KANE WAS VERY PRIVATE, and we did not know how this date would go, so it did not surprise me when he took me to a small, easily overlooked restaurant on the Pacific Coast Highway. I was more than okay with his decision since it

meant having him all to myself, without the interruption of fans or paparazzi.

When we walked inside, I gasped at the cozy, romantic atmosphere. It was also tastefully decorated for Christmas, which made it seem even more magical.

A middle-aged man in slacks and a white dress shirt warmly smiled as we approached his podium. “Reservation?”

“Yes, sir. Under Remington.”

“Excellent.” He pulled two menus from a wire basket beside him and said, “This way,” before leading us to a booth at the back.

They built the restaurant so that the entrance faced the hills, and the back wall looked across the PCH to the ocean, so our table butted up to the wall of glass, tinted just enough to keep gawkers from seeing inside. The sides of the booth were tall, so it felt almost like our own little world.

We ate, talked, and laughed for hours, learning more about each other’s families and our likes and dislikes and sharing funny stories from other jobs.

I wasn’t surprised when he finally got around at asking about my sister’s nickname for me.

“Does your middle name start with A?”

Sighing, I shook my head, then took a sip of my wine before setting the glass down. “It’s so ridiculous and it seriously drives my mother crazy.”

Kane raised an eyebrow and grinned, letting me know that he wouldn’t let it go until he’d heard it all.

“When my parents met, they fell in love instantly and wanted to get married. But, my father was,”—I used air quotes—“ ‘married’ at the time. He’d married a childhood friend who needed a green card when they were in college. Sophie—who is like an aunt to all of us—had met the man of her dreams and she and my dad were already in the process of filing for divorce.”

Kane nodded. “Sounds simple enough. Did your mother have an issue with the situation?”

“No, she completely understood and like I said, Sophie and her family are super close with us. But, the legal stuff takes time and well...my mom and dad...they couldn’t wait until he was officially single to...” My nose scrunched up. I really didn’t like thinking about my parents doing shit like that.

“She got pregnant with you?” Kane crowed, laughing hysterically.

“Yup,” I agreed, taking another large gulp of wine.

When he calmed, he cocked his head and winked at me. “And the A...?”

“The Scarlet Letter,” I mumbled.

Kane roared with laughter and since I enjoyed the sound, it didn’t the reason for his merriment didn’t bother me as much.

When the man reluctantly came over to inform us they were closing, I mumbled an apology, feeling a little sheepish that we hadn’t noticed the place emptying.

With a pat on my shoulder, he winked at me. “Don’t be embarrassed. I’m glad you two were so comfortable and had such a good time that you wanted to stay. It means we’re doing our job right. Honestly, I hate to make you leave, but I need to get home to my wife before she banishes me to the couch.”

I giggled and took his offered hand, allowing him to help me scoot out of the booth and stand up. Kane thanked him and gave him a generous tip before placing his hand low on my back and guiding me outside and over to his Audi.

We settled ourselves in the car. Then he pulled onto the highway, took my hand, and laced our fingers together before resting it on his thigh. As we drove in comfortable silence, enjoying the peaceful evening views, I knew I was already falling for him.

Three



I'd expected my date with Scarlet to go well, but it turned out to be more than I could have hoped for. She was amazing, and I knew it wouldn't be long before I was head over heels for her. Disappointment filled me when I drove through her gated entrance and parked in her driveway. I didn't want the night to end. However, I wanted to build something with Scarlet, not have a fling in the sheets, so I was determined to go slow.

We sat in the car for a few minutes, neither of us making the first move to exit the vehicle.

"You didn't tell me why you call me red," she said with a soft smile as she turned in her seat to face me.

I grinned as I mirrored her position. "Do you remember on the last project when the costume designer asked you to choose between a purple and red gown?"

One corner of her mouth kicked up. "I told her not to come near me with anything red."

I nodded and smiled crookedly. "And I was confused. I didn't know if it was red clothes in general or just red dresses."

"You asked me, and I told you I hated anything red. Ever since I was a kid, everyone assumed I liked the color because my name is Scarlet. It drove me crazy, and I grew to hate the color altogether."

When I said nothing, she cocked her head and huffed, "You call me red because you think it's funny that I don't like

the color?”

I shrugged with an unrepentant grin. “I also think you’d look sexy as fuck in anything red. But especially something that looks better on the floor.”

Scarlet’s face turned crimson, just as I’d intended, and I touched the tip of one finger to each cheek. “And this,” I admitted. “I can only think of a handful of times when I’ve seen you blush. Except with me. I seem to bring it out in you, and I know it makes me sound like a smug dick, but I love that only I can leave you feeling flustered and off balance.” I glided my finger along her jaw, then down her neck, and traced her collarbone, smiling when she shivered and blushed. “And I’m pretty damn cocky that I can make you flushed with arousal because it means I’m breaking through the mask you wear with everyone else.”

Scarlet blinked a few times; then, she surprised the hell out of me when she climbed over the center console and straddled my lap. “As long as you let me past your walls. Then we’re even.”

My hands rested on her curvy hips, and I squeezed them gently. “Should we see who breaks first?”

She tunneled her hands into my hair, and her expression turned wicked. “You’re on, Remington.”

“Bring it on, red,” I growled before my mouth descended onto hers.

Son of a bitch. The brief whispers of a kiss I’d given her hadn’t prepared me for the explosion of Scarlet’s taste. The combination of chocolate, vanilla, and her own something spicy was nirvana, and I instantly became addicted. My hands moved up her rib cage until they rested just below her breasts and my thumbs rubbed the sensitive undersides. She gasped, and I plunged my tongue fully into her mouth. Gnawing hunger filled me, and a groan escaped my lungs before I angled my head to deepen the kiss.

My cock was hard as a fucking rock and Scarlet stilled for a moment when she’d felt it swell beneath her. Any intention I

had to pull back and check on her dissolved into lust when she pressed herself down and rubbed her pussy along the ridge of my dick.

Passion took over and my hands dove under her skirt, shoving it to her waist so I could palm her firm, round ass. I guided her movements, holding her tight against me as I rocked up into her heat. I was acutely aware that only a thin strip of fabric covered her pussy, and if I gave in to my desire to rip away her panties and plunge my fingers into her hot, wet center, I'd be past the point of no return.

Mustering all of my strength, I slipped a hand between us and rubbed her pleasure button while she dry-humped my dick. Seconds later, she threw her head back and cried out as her passion peaked, and she tumbled into an orgasm.

I leaned back and admired the beautiful sight of Scarlet coming on my lap. But there was a burning question I needed answered...I used my free hand to grasp the hem of her dress and yank it up over her breasts. The pretty blush on her cheeks had turned to a fiery crimson, and I swallowed hard when my eyes trailed down, seeing the flush traveling all the way down into her soaked panties. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!* Swiftly dragging her dress back down, I sucked in several deep breaths as I tried to think about something besides my desire to sink inside her drenched center.

When Scarlet collapsed against me, panting and shaking with aftershocks, I'd successfully calmed myself enough to reclaim my control.

"That was by far the sexiest thing I have ever seen in my entire life," I muttered as I buried my face in the side of her neck.

I couldn't sit there with her on my lap anymore if I intended to leave, so I reluctantly grasped her hips and lifted her over the console and back into her seat. She pouted, making me grin before saying, "I want to see you again before you go."

"Me too," she readily agreed, sending a bolt of relief through me. Then her brow furrowed as she thought hard

about something. I didn't rush her, figuring she'd tell me once she'd worked it all out in her mind. "Maybe we should keep this casual for a while," she suggested. I opened my mouth to protest, but she placed her finger over my lips and kept talking. "I'm not asking you to be my dirty little secret"—she rolled her eyes when my lips curved up into a wicked smile—"I'm just suggesting that no matter how serious we might get, we should keep it casual in public. Give the impression that this is a deepening friendship. It will give us time to explore this relationship without public scrutiny."

Her explanation made me feel vindicated and thrilled to know I'd been right about her. She smiled as her eyes roamed my face, and I imagined I was lit up like a Christmas tree.

"While I don't like the idea of you being a secret—although, I'm more than willing to explore the dirty part,"—I grinned when she rolled her eyes—"you make complete sense. And I can't say that I don't love the idea of having you all to myself for a while."

Scarlet's turquoise eyes sparkled, and I couldn't help curling my hand around her neck to pull her in for one more steamy kiss.

We were both breathing hard when I pulled back and I sighed as I touched my forehead to hers.

"Do you want to come in?" she queried softly.

"More than you know, baby," I groaned. "But despite what we might portray to the public, this is not casual to me. You are not a fling. So, we will not have sex on our first date."

"But—"

I raised my head and met her gaze with a firm stare. "Not on the first date, red."

Irritation flashed across her face, and I snickered. "You called me that just to annoy me so I wouldn't try to entice you to stay," she accused, crossing her arms under her ample breasts, pushing them up and distracting me. "Eyes up here, Candy Kane," she said dryly.

Grimacing, I sighed, then chuckled. "Touché, baby."



MY PHONE RANG JUST as I poured my second cup of coffee that morning. I was tired as fuck after spending the entire night dreaming of Scarlet and her hot little body. I woke up on the verge of climax several times before I finally trudged into the bathroom and took an ice-cold shower.

My eyes darted to my phone, and I saw Della's name and number on the screen. I contemplated letting it go to voicemail; too tired to deal with agent shit this morning. However, I was waiting to hear about a project, so I padded over to the counter and swiped to answer, then put it on speaker.

"Della," I greeted before swallowing another large gulp of coffee.

"What the fuck, Kane?" she yelled.

Startled, I accidentally sloshed the hot liquid over the side of the cup, burning my hand. "Ouch! Shit!" I dropped the cup into the sink before turning on the cold water and sticking my hand under it.

"Are you okay?" she asked, sounding impatient.

"Yeah, I just—"

"Good. Now what the fuck?"

"You'll have to be a little more specific, Della," I drawled.

"How the hell could you get engaged and not tell me? How many times do I have to tell you I'm your first fucking call? You have to give me a heads up so we can strategize—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I interrupted as I shut off the water, my hand no longer burning, and grabbed a towel to dry it. "Engaged? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You tell me, Kane. It's all over entertainment news. People magazine called me for a quote, and I had to get out of it without them realizing that I had no fucking clue what was going on! Turn on Entertainment First."

I stalked into my den and grabbed the TV remote, turning it on and flipping to a channel dedicated to news and talk shows about the entertainment industry. After the current commercial finished, a talk show came on, and the host smiled into the camera. “We’re *back and continuing to discuss the shocking news that emerged this morning. Is Kane Remington engaged? And to Scarlet Cassidy? Did anyone even know they were dating?*”

What the actual fuck?

“I’m not fucking engaged, Della,” I gritted out through clenched teeth. “And I barely had a first date with Scarlet last night. Who reported this bullshit?”

“As far as I can tell, the first one to say anything about it was Star Watch. My sources have found no earlier mentions in print or other media. Why would she print this? Who told her?”

“I don’t fucking know, but I am going to find out.” Fucking Mandi Donovan. She’d been the first person to report on several of my breakups, and I hated that she’d seemed to know more about my shitty relationships than I did. I didn’t know how she’d found out about things with Scarlet unless she had a source. But it wasn’t as if she checked her facts, either.

The co-host of the show caught my attention again. “*They sure look cozy in the photos!*”

The screen filled with a few pictures from the night before, one of us at dinner, another where we were talking in Scarlet’s driveway, and the one that really pissed me off. A closeup of us locked in a passionate kiss.

“How the hell...?” I’d taken Scarlet to a place well off the beaten path, a hidden diamond where we could get to know each other without prying eyes or interrupting fans. After my last few disastrous relationships had been splashed all over the news, I was even more wary of letting the media get ahold of any details of my personal life.

“Do you think this will boost Scarlet’s career?” the host mused.

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” her companion replied. *“I heard she’s being considered for the other lead role in his next movie, and I can’t imagine Kane would let them turn down his fiancé.”*

The co-host’s words were like a slap in the face. Scarlet was being considered for *Life Flight*? Why hadn’t she mentioned it?

“Did you know about that?” I asked.

“It’s news to me,” Della answered.

“I thought they offered the role to Tara Langley.” That had been several weeks ago, and knowing this business, it wasn’t shocking to learn that there had been a change. Though I was surprised, no one had told me.

“Tara had to back out. She’s pregnant and can’t work around the shooting schedule. I knew they were looking for someone new but hadn’t heard yet.”

“Scarlet’s certainly not new to the industry, but being linked with someone like Kane Remington...” The co-host shook her head. *“They will be a powerhouse couple, for sure.”*

“According to Star Watch, they’ve been dating in secret since this last relationship ended, but he wanted to keep things a secret. We all know how private Kane is.”

“So, how did anyone find out?”

The host winked at her companion before returning to the camera and smirking. *“My guess would be the visit she made to a very exclusive bridal boutique two nights ago.”* A picture flashed on the screen, one of Scarlet walking into a bridal store.

I didn’t want to believe it, but their speculations kept bouncing around in my head. Scarlet and I were the only ones who’d known about our date last night. She hadn’t mentioned being considered for my next big project. But she’d been the

one to suggest keeping our relationship a secret...had she been playing me?

“Well, shit,” Della muttered. “I missed an email from Dane two days ago.”

Dane was the casting director and one of the head producers for *Life Flight*.

“He wanted me to see what you thought about Scarlet or Lisha McDonald for the lead role.”

The more I heard, the less I could deny that Scarlet was the most likely source for the circulating rumors. There was no one else who stood to gain from spreading this bullshit. Even if I publicly called her bluff, there was proof we’d been on a date. Everyone was suddenly talking about her.

“It had to be Scarlet,” I ranted, angry at myself for misjudging her.

“What do you want me to do?” Della asked.

“Nothing,” I grunted. “Anything we do or say will only add fuel to the fire. I’ll cut ties with Scarlet, and this will blow over. With no more proof that we are together, much less engaged, they’ll realize it’s not true and move on to something else.”

“You’re sure you want to stay silent?” Della pushed. “If you make a statement that this is all lies, it will make her look like a gold digger.”

“We both know that doesn’t matter in Hollywood, Dell. Bad publicity is still publicity.”

“Are you going to confront her in private, then?”

“No. I’m done with Scarlet Cassidy. But I want Tom on the phone with Mandi Donovan ASAP. I don’t want her printing any more of this shit. And I know it’s a long shot but see if he can get her to admit who her source is.” Tom was the head of my legal team. He was a fucking shark, and if he couldn’t get the name of Mandi’s source from her, no one could.

“One last thing. Tell the studio to offer to Lisha, or I walk.”

Four



SCARLET

My mouth hung open as I read the article my friend Andrew had texted to me. I was going to strangle Mandi Donovan. But first, Kane and I needed to do damage control.

My phone rang, making me jump, and I quickly swiped the screen to answer when I saw it was my agent, Ty. “It’s not true,” I sighed in lieu of a greeting.

“I know that,” he replied succinctly, making me feel much better because he hadn’t questioned my integrity. I’d known Ty since I was a kid, but this business...it changed people. It could make you jaded and mistrustful if you let it. I knew better than to think Ty wouldn’t give me the benefit of the doubt, but I’d just been so caught off guard. “I’d like to think you wouldn’t get engaged and keep it from my wife.”

“Of course not,” I grumbled. I adored Collette, and I also wouldn’t risk Ty’s wrath if I upset her. He worshipped her. Their love was like something out of a movie. Currently, my love life seemed more like a circus.

“This puts so much fucking pressure on us, Ty,” I groaned. “We’ve only been on one damn date!”

“True, but celebrities have made things work in worse situations.” His tone became teasing when he added, “Although it might have been easier to make this go away if you hadn’t been seen at Noir Bridal the night before your date with Kane.”

“I was trying on a bridesmaid dress for Violet’s wedding!” I snapped, frustrated with the situation, even though I had

done nothing wrong.

“Have you talked to Kane?”

I sighed. “No. I was about to when you called. He’s probably on the verge of killing someone. You know how private he is.”

“Check in with him. See if his PR or legal team has unearthed anything about this. We’ll talk again later.”

“Okay. Thanks, Ty.”

Taking my phone and a cup of coffee to my butter-colored, overstuffed couch, I set my drink on the coffee table and then flopped onto the cushions. I pulled up Kane’s number and hit send, taking a sip from my mug while I waited for him to answer.

“Scarlet.” Kane’s tone was harsh when he answered.

I grimaced, feeling bad that he was having to deal with all this bullshit. “Hey,” I said softly. “I wanted to check and make sure you were okay.”

“Right.” A harsh, humorless laugh burst through the phone, furrowing my brow. “Cut the bullshit, Scarlet. I don’t know what you hoped to gain by leaking this crap to the paps...and Mandi Donovan, of all people. I obviously misjudged you. I have to say, I’m impressed with your moxie, but I’m not letting anyone ride my fucking coattails to further their career. Especially someone as conniving and deceitful as you. You’ll have to pick a different sap or do the fucking work yourself. But don’t expect to use *Life Flight* as your next stepping stone. I already told the studio it’s me or you, and we both know I hold the cards with them.”

I was stunned into silence. Utterly shocked at Kane’s tirade. He was blaming me? Accusing me of being the one who leaked the information and started the rumors about us being engaged? And what was he talking about riding his coattails...life flight...a helicopter ride? I was baffled. “I don’t ___”

“Save it for the next fool who wants to listen to your lies, Scarlet.” Then he hung up.

What the hell was that???

Had I entered the Twilight Zone somewhere between last night and this morning?

I still wasn't sure I'd understood Kane's tirade because... we'd worked together for a long time. He couldn't possibly believe I was a gold-digging social climber, could he?

The whole thing was preposterous, anyway. Although I'd only been working in movies for a few years, I'd cut my acting teeth on Broadway as a kid. Stage acting was my career path, and I was happy with that because I adored it. But, when a director approached me and asked me to read for a movie/musical, I decided to try something new. It had been a hit, and offers for other projects had rolled in. I'd sort of fallen into the movie scene—though I still did stage work on and off because I loved it so much. I didn't need to step on anyone to grow in my career. Kane could take his coattails and shove them right up his ass.

Maybe it had been a joke? One he didn't realize was so mean and hurtful? He was known for being stoic and hard to read, so hearing him be so emotional, even if it was spewing rage, made me question what I'd heard.

I hit his number again, but it went directly to voicemail.

The more I stewed on Kane's words, the angrier I became. Finally, I called Ty to get his advice on what to do next because I was ready to move on and leave this crap behind me.

When he answered, I summarized my call with Kane, and he was understandably astonished. "What the fuck?" His tone was low and dangerous. He sounded like he wanted to beat the shit out of Kane. Which shouldn't have made me feel better, but what woman didn't have a tiny vindictive streak?

"Do you know what he meant when he said something about life flight?" I asked.

"It's his next movie," Ty growled. "You were on the shortlist for the lead, but nothing has been decided. My guess is that they floated your name to Kane to get his opinion

before bringing you in to read. I didn't want to say anything until it was a solid possibility."

"Oh." It had just been another reason for Kane to blame me. "What do I do now?"

"Nothing. Most likely, any heat will fall on Kane, anyway. Everyone knows how cynical and private he is. They'll probably assume he dumped you because of the leak, and you'll become the victim. Besides, it will blow over and be forgotten as soon as the next celebrity adopts a monkey or goes into rehab."

Despite my crappy mood, I chuckled because he was right. The fans were fickle creatures drawn to drama like a moth to a flame.

The next day, I took one more shot at trying to smooth things over with Kane, but again, I was sent straight to voicemail.

I'd known Kane for a while, but we'd barely spent any time in each other's presence outside of work before our date. His rejection shouldn't have hurt as much as it did. But somehow, he'd worked his way into my heart and shattered it into irreparable pieces. It took me a little time to set it all behind me, but I built a wall around myself in the process. I never let people get close enough to see through it, never let anyone know they affected me.

With one exception. I hated Christmas. No amount of pretending could change it, so I didn't bother trying to pretend.

Bah humbug.

Five



Present Day

“Don’t walk away from me!” I growled, grabbing Scarlett’s arm and spinning her around. “We aren’t done talking about this.”

A camera swung behind Scarlett’s head, getting a closeup shot of our enraged expressions. It wasn’t difficult for me to tap into that emotion, considering I was filming a scene with a woman I wanted nothing to do with. There weren’t many people in Hollywood that I avoided at all costs, but Scarlett Cassidy was near the top of the list. Just behind that bitch, Mandi Donovan, who made it her mission in life to print as much bullshit and gossip in her rag, *Star Watch*, as possible. That Scarlett had even given her the time of day was enough to make me want to spit nails.

I told myself to get a fucking grip and focus on the work. To see Bianca standing in front of me instead of Scarlett. But this scene was a little close to home, and it was making it difficult.

Scarlett yanked her arm out of my grip and spun around to face me, planting her hands on her gently curved hips.

“Why?” she snapped. “You clearly haven’t heard a word I’ve said.”

“What is there to say, Bianca? I walked in on you kissing Cannon.” I took a step closer, locking onto her turquoise orbs, which were currently spitting fire. It was sexy as hell and I fucking hated that I still wanted her after finding out just what

kind of person she really was. “What kind of woman tells a man she loves him, then makes out with Santa—who just happens to be my brother—the first chance she gets? What was the point of stringing me along if it was him you always wanted?”

Scarlett let out a cute little growl, and my groin tightened, further pissing me off. “If there’s nothing to say, why aren’t we done with this pointless conversation?”

I paused for dramatic effect, letting the viewer see hurt flashing on my face before I covered it up with anger again. “I guess you’re right. The only thing left to say is, ‘We’re done.’ Goodbye, Bianca.” My fingers flexed, and I reached for her, then I balled them into fists and took two steps back.

Scarlett sighed and wrapped her arms around herself, looking at me with a devastated expression. “Hunter, did you ever stop for even one second to consider that things might not have been what they seemed?” She suddenly looked small and broken, which was a true testament to her talent, considering the real Scarlett had always been larger than life.

“I know what I saw, Bianca.” I gave her one last look of longing and betrayal, then stormed off the set.

“Cut!” Luca Regis—the director—called, standing from his chair. “We got it,” he grunted in his usual gruff and brooding tone. “We’re done for the night. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Luca,” Scarlett replied airily, smiling at the sound tech helping her remove her Lavalier microphone.

I just nodded, unable to stop glaring at her as I took off my mic and handed it to another tech. It seriously pissed me off that she didn’t appear to be as affected by me as I was by her. I also didn’t know why I cared so fucking much. I should’ve been glad that she wasn’t pining over me. But I liked the idea that she was suffering. And not just because it would be a fitting penance, but because misery fucking loves company.

It had been two years, but I still craved her. Still dreamt about her. Still wished I knew why she’d...*whatever*. I gritted

my teeth and told myself to get a grip as I stomped off the set and headed for a dressing room. My phone buzzed, and I yanked it from my pocket to see my agent's name flashing. I was still salty with her over convincing me to take the role in this ridiculous movie, especially after I found out about Scarlet's involvement. And, I fucking hated Christmas.

Bah-fucking-humbug.

I stopped at the door to the dressing room and my thumb hovered over the answer button.

"Nice job."

My head flew up at the unexpected sound of Scarlett's voice right behind me. I twisted my torso and watched her approach, then pass me by.

"Your portrayal of a bull-headed, self-righteous asshole was spot on. Perhaps because you two are so much alike."

I almost missed what she'd said because my eyes were glued to her perfect ass and swaying hips as she sashayed down the hall. My lips curled into a frown as I scowled at her back. "Is that all you've got, Red?" I asked in a caustic tone, using the nickname that had always pricked her temper. "You're going to have to come at me with better ammunition than that if you want to hurt my feelings." I laughed, somewhat bitterly because the truth was, she'd already caused me pain—while giving me a hefty blow to my ego. I never expected her to turn out like the other fame-hungry women who'd used me to further their own agendas.

"If I thought you had any, I'd try harder," she sassed as she stopped outside the door to the next dressing room and pierced me with her unreadable turquoise eyes. "But, like Hunter, the wall you've built around yourself is too thick to penetrate. Perhaps that's what makes you both so blind."

I folded my arms across my chest and raised an eyebrow, silently staring at her, which was all the reaction she was going to get.

Scarlett watched me for a moment and stuck her hands in her back pockets. "You miss out on a lot when you aren't

willing to open your eyes and see beyond your assumptions.” Then she rolled her eyes and cocked her head to the side. “And heaven forbid you ever admit when you’re wrong.”

“One date and you think you know me so well?” I scoffed.

“No,” she mused with a shrug. “I thought I did. But I’m willing to admit I was wrong, because clearly, you weren’t who I thought you were.”

“Really?” I asked dryly. If anyone had turned out to be different, it was her. I had been completely sucker punched when I learned what she had done.

“Really.” Her eyes narrowed, and her sexy mouth pursed, irritation bleeding through her blank mask. “I would have pegged you as someone who would ask for an explanation before reacting. You have a reputation for being laid back and open-minded. So, did I see the real you? Or does the rest of the world and I’m just special?” The last part was said in an acidic tone. She observed me for a moment more, and though her outward expression remained neutral, I saw a wealth of emotion in her eyes. Then she shrugged and disappeared into the dressing room.

What was that about?

Her words had more of an impact than I expected. I’d never questioned how I’d handled the situation with Scarlett two years ago. There was no excuse as far as I was concerned...so I didn’t give her the chance to explain. Even though I still wondered why.

However, it had been her eyes that penetrated the wall of bitterness around me. Other than working on projects together from time to time, we hadn’t really spoken since the news broke in the rags.

Scarlett was a stellar actress, but having been in this business so long, I’d learned to see through people’s bullshit. Although, Scarlet had made me question my ability to read people. Still, I’d worked with Scarlett enough to know when she dropped the mask of her character. But our last real conversation had been over the phone...well, conversation

was a bit of an overstatement. I'd been so angry that rather than let her speak, I hung up as soon as I'd said my piece. We'd never discussed it in person.

As she'd been speaking to me in the hall, though, her beautiful turquoise eyes had sparked with anger. And pain... she'd looked hurt and resigned.

For the first time, I admitted to myself that I might have made a colossal mistake.

Six



SCARLET

I studied Audrey—my favorite hair and makeup technician—in the mirror as she carefully removed one of my false eyelashes. The big, round bulbs made it easier to watch the play of emotions on her face when I asked about her relationship with Luca. She was working awfully hard to seem nonchalant, but I hadn't missed the way he looked at her. There was something simmering between them.

Before I could ask her another question, the makeup trailer shook slightly as someone stomped up the steps. The door was flung open and in walked Luca, his commanding presence immediately filling up the small space. He was brilliant, with a brooding and tough exterior, but I'd seen a softness there when he was with Audrey that made me smile. However, he could be a little intimidating, even to me, which said a hell of a lot. Especially when he was on a warpath like he seemed to be tonight—if his expression was any indication.

“What's wrong with your hands?” Audrey snapped. “Don't you believe in knocking?”

Holy shit, I thought as I gasped. I didn't take bullshit from anyone, but *no one* spoke to Luca like that—both out of respect and fear. Although, part of me wanted to laugh at Audrey's spunk. He might not have realized it yet, but she was just what he needed.

Luca's hands were curled into tight fists at his sides, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. He scowled at me and I smiled back, even as I stood up, ready to make my escape.

“Could you please report to Security and get your name checked off the list? Ryder’s doing a headcount,” he growled.

Audrey wasn’t oblivious to his mood, so she quickly handed me a mini make-up remover pack, which I gratefully accepted before slipping out of the trailer and heading toward security.

With the sun down, even Southern California could get a little chilly on a December night, so I hurried across the lot. However, my steps slowed when I spotted a tall, muscular, blond man who made my heart race and my panties wet. His mouth was pressed together in a frustrated expression, but my heart skipped a beat when I thought about his swoon-worthy smile. The one he’d used to convince me to go out on a date with him. And I’d fallen for his charms like an idiot.

It still made my heart hurt to think about that night because after the shit hit the fan, we went from a budding romance to enemies overnight.

Kane was walking hastily toward the security office, but his deep blue eyes scanned the surrounding area, looking out for something...or someone. While I was sorely tempted to hide. I wasn’t about to turn into a coward. And even though I hated Christmas, I had no desire to spend it in jail for murder. Not much got me riled, but that man made me want to Hulk smash him. Then string him up on the North Pole and laugh while his many bits turned to icicles.

When I spotted Andrew Briggs, Kane’s set double, exiting the building, I made a beeline for him. I’d known Andrew for several years, and we’d become really good friends. We’d all been working on the same film when everything went down with Kane, and he’d been the shoulder I cried on...well, more like the shoulder I fumed on.

Andrew saw me coming, and something in my expression must have tipped him off because he canted his head to the left, toward a bench set next to a brightly decorated Christmas tree. Then he popped his head back into the office before walking my way, nodding at Kane when they crossed paths.

I sat on the bench and shot the tree a scathing look.

Andrew chuckled as he took a seat next to me. “What did that poor tree ever do to you?” he asked in a thick Texas drawl that made many a woman swoon. Even I got a little flutter in my stomach, though we’d never been more than friends.

“It represents all that is evil about this time of year,” I grumbled.

He laughed, but unlike me, his eyes lit up as he took in the sparkly garland and shining ornaments. “You can be a Scrooge all you want, Scarlett, but you won’t convince me this isn’t the most wonderful time of the year.”

I rolled my eyes teasingly and quipped, “Ba humbug.”

We both chuckled, then sat in comfortable silence for a minute, before Andrew gave me the side eye and asked, “Are you going to tell me why you’re hiding out here?”

“I’m not hiding,” I protested insistently. “I’m avoiding.”

“Still, that’s not like you.”

I winced, and my shoulders slumped. “I may have opened my big mouth and dredged up the past.”

“With Kane?” Andrew asked, his brows disappearing into his hairline.

“Yeah. His character was being just as pig-headed as he is, and it just set me off.”

He shook his head with a lopsided grin. “Men. I’m so glad I’m straight. Women are much less prone to drama.”

I burst into laughter, and it helped cleanse the bitter anger that was infecting me. When I sobered, his smile turned sympathetic. “He’s never let you explain, has he?”

I sighed. “No.” When Star Watch had reported that we were secretly engaged the day after our first—and only—date, I was livid. Especially when I saw the pictures of us that could only have been taken from inside the restaurant. “I could just murder Mandi Donovan,” I muttered acerbically. “I still have no clue how she even knew about our date. We were so careful. But what frustrates me the most is that I still let it get

to me. I always think I'm over it, then we work on a project together, and I realize I'm still hurt and seriously pissed."

Andrew nodded and draped his arm around my shoulder. "I saw the chemistry between you guys. I can't imagine it's easy to let that go. And honestly, Scarlett, I was pretty shocked when you told me what Kane said. It sounded so out of character for him."

"Me too. Maybe it's a good thing we never got together." I laid my head on Andrew's shoulder. "Whenever we've ended up on the same project, he's so laid back and takes everything in stride, except when it comes to me. Obviously, I bring out the worst in him."

"Hmmm."

I elbowed Andrew in the side and popped my head up to glare at him. "Spit it out, Briggs. I know that 'hmmm' means something."

"Scarlett, have you considered that he loses his cool with you because he hasn't let you go, either? The chemistry between you two on stage is explosive. Maybe you should try again; see if he'll listen this time."

I mulled over his words, then shook my head. "It's too late for that."

"Well then. Do you want me to kick his ass? I mean, it's not like he needs it as long as mine is in tiptop shape."

A grin spread across my face, and I laughed. Once again, he lightened my mood, and I gave him a quick hug. "You do have a very fine ass, Andrew Briggs."

"Like I don't know that." He winked and stood. "By the way, I checked you in with Ryder."

Ryder Thorne was our head of security, and I was suddenly reminded that I had no idea why we were all being summoned there. "What happened?"

Andrew waved a hand nonchalantly. "Small fire on the set. It was put out quickly, and no one was hurt."

“Ah. Okay. Well, thanks for getting me off the hook,” I said with a chuckle.

“Sure thing.” He held out his hand, and as he helped me to my feet, his eyes strayed over my shoulder for a moment before coming back to meet mine. “If you’re going to continue to ‘avoid’ Kane, I suggest you get moving because he’s headed this way.”

I shot Andrew an annoyed frown, but he just grinned and sauntered away.

With a frustrated grunt, I looked over at Kane, contemplating my next move. From his confident stride and determined expression, I knew my words earlier had had an impact, and he clearly wanted to discuss them.

I mentally kicked myself again for losing control of my mouth but nodded at Kane since not acknowledging him as I walked back to my trailer would seem too much like running away. However, I didn’t stick around for a conversation, instead spinning on my heel and walking quickly—but casually—toward my trailer.

I’m avoiding a confrontation, not hiding from how he makes me feel.

When I felt the warmth of his body at my back, I picked up my pace, but it wasn’t enough because he darted around to my front, forcing me to halt. “Kane,” I greeted, deadpan.

“We need to talk,” he stated.

“We really don’t,” I replied, shaking my head and stepping around him so I could resume walking. Unfortunately, he moved to my side and kept pace with me.

“I want to know what you meant earlier.”

I sighed. “Nothing. I was trying to piss you off,” I lied. “It was petty and juvenile. You know how I can be.”

Kane laughed harshly, and I darted a glance at him before forcing my eyes forward again. “Bullshit. I doubt I could find one person in your life who would ever describe you with those adjectives.”

I snorted. “Try asking my sisters.” When we were younger, we’d been typical teenage girls. And since there was barely a year between each of us, we could be super competitive. We were close now, though, and they were pretty pissed at Kane for being a jackass. “On second thought,” I drawled as we reached my trailer. “I’d stay away from them if I were you.”

“Was I wrong? Two years ago. Was it you who tipped off Mandi?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I said as I ascended the steps to my door.

“Scarlett,” Kane growled as he curled his fingers around my arm and tugged just hard enough to force me to return to the ground and face him. “We are going to talk about this.”

“We’re really not,” I gasped as sparks exploded where our skin touched and streaks of electricity shot to every nerve ending, causing me to shiver.

“Fuck,” Kane grunted before he yanked me into his arms and his mouth crashed down on mine.

Seven



I knew better than to touch Scarlett when we weren't on set. Once again, I reminded myself that she should be the last woman I wanted, but my desire for her had been pent up for too long. And now that I had my hands on her—without an audience—and the chemistry had flared between us when we touched, I couldn't last another second without feeling her lips on mine again. *Fucking finally.*

My patience had already been paper thin after waiting two long years to get another taste of her, and I struggled to maintain control when I crashed my mouth against hers. My tongue swept inside when she gasped in surprise. Her hands slid up my arms to grip my shoulders, and the kiss quickly spun out of control.

Our lips still locked together, we stumbled up the stairs and into her trailer. I kicked the door shut and spun us around to press Scarlett against the hard surface, molding my front to hers, grinding my thick erection into her center. Cupping her cheeks with my palms, I tilted her head; the angle allowing me to deepen the kiss and get a better taste. I had hoped that I'd built everything up in my head from our one kiss before things had gone to hell, but it was better than I remembered.

I knew we needed to talk before things went too far, but I forced my thoughts away from all the reasons we shouldn't be doing this and devoured her mouth until we were both breathless. The only reason I finally tore my lips from hers was so that I could frantically strip her out of her shirt. When I saw her quivering breasts, bouncing slightly from her choppy

breaths, and the pebbled nipples poking against the lacy cups of her bra, a groan rumbled up my chest. “So damn beautiful. I need you in my mouth.”

“Yesss,” she hissed, arching her back as my hand slid around to pop the clasp.

“That’s it, baby. I know what you want. What we both need.” As soon as the plump swells spilled free, I lowered my head, but paused when I realized that there was writing tattooed in a curve under each breast. They weren’t in English and I wanted to ask what they meant, but I was distracted when she moaned and arched her back again. Returning my attention to her puckered nipples, I sucked one deep into my mouth. Scarlett’s fingers dug into my scalp, holding me close to her chest while I licked and sucked the tight peak. Gliding my hands up her ribcage, I cupped the undersides of her generous breasts, enjoying how they filled my hands.

Her knees wobbled when I sucked hard, then flicked my tongue over a taut bud. “Kane,” she moaned.

Tilting my head back, I glanced up and my breath caught in my lungs. Her cheeks were flushed pink, and her perfect mouth was parted as she stared down at me, stark need shining in her turquoise eyes.

“Fuck, Scarlett, it shouldn’t be possible for you to be any more beautiful,” I rasped. “But seeing you like this...fuck, baby. You’re a goddess.” Straightening, I wrapped her white-blond hair around my fist and trailed kisses down her neck before nipping at her pulse point. After a second, I picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around me as I stumbled over to the couch and laid her down. In seconds, I’d removed her leggings and panties, leaving her naked and so fucking gorgeous. My eyes swept down the length of her body, but instead of running them back up, they remained glued to Scarlett’s mound. She was fucking bare, and it was hot as hell, but that wasn’t why I was fascinated with the spot. It was because she had a tattoo right above her slit. It was a tree with intricate branches that formed something like a Celtic knot. Upon closer inspection, I realized the roots were actually more

script in another language. And directly above the tree was a symbol that represented the sun.

“Amazing,” I rasped as I used a finger to trace the pattern. “As much as I hate the idea of anyone but me getting this close to your pussy, this is...damn, baby. It’s incredible and looks so beautiful on your soft skin. But I gotta say, it’s turning me the fuck on.”

A throaty laugh escaped her lips, and the sound sent vibrations of pleasure straight to my cock. I was going to lose it before we’d even started if I didn’t get a hold of myself. I gripped my control in an iron fist and whipped off my T-shirt, tossing it away before lowering my body over hers. “Damn, baby. You feel amazing beneath me.”

I dropped my head down and took her mouth in another ravaging kiss as my hands explored every inch of her bare skin. After a few minutes, I was so fucking hard there were black spots in my vision, so I reached between us and released the button on my jeans before lowering the zipper. I didn’t pull myself out just yet, knowing it would break the fragile string holding on to my sanity.

Scarlett’s hand was suddenly at my waistband, slipping inside to wrap her fingers around my cock, but I hastily removed it and raised her arms up over her head. She pouted, and I chuckled at the adorable, yet insanely sexy picture she made.

I shook my head and smirked. “You will not rush me, Scarlett,” I told her firmly. “For two years, I’ve dreamt of you like this. Seeing your eyes glazed with passion, your mouth pink and swollen from my kisses, and feeling your body trembling with desire. Two fucking years, baby. Wanting you the whole damn time, even though I knew better.”

I regretted the words the second they left my mouth, even more so when her entire body stiffened before she shoved her hands against my chest. “You don’t know anything, Kane Remington.”

She caught me by surprise, so she was able to push me back a few inches. “Scarlett, I—oomph!”

Before I could finish, she'd rolled us off the couch, so we landed hard on my back, knocking the breath out of me. She took advantage of my stunned state and jumped up, grabbing her clothes frantically before dashing to the tiny bathroom and slamming the door shut.

Fucking great, Remington.

I was pissed at myself for ruining the moment, but as my breathing returned to normal and blood pumped north to my head, I had to admit that it would have been a mistake. Oh, I intended to have Scarlett—in as many ways as possible. But we needed to clear the air first because I fully intended to keep her. Even if the leak had come from her, I was going to let her explain this time and figure out a way to trust each other again.

But, my gut was telling me it hadn't been Scarlett. I hadn't let myself consider another option last time, maybe if I had, my intuition would have told me the same thing. I'd messed up big time and I knew there would be a whole lot of groveling in my future.

My T-shirt was flung over the coffee machine on the tiny kitchen counter across from the couch. I reached over to retrieve it, then put it on as I settled on the couch, waiting for Scarlett to reappear.

"I want you gone when I come back out," she yelled, her voice slightly muffled behind the door.

"Not happening," I replied in an even tone, simply stating a fact.

The door slammed against the wall as it was thrown open, and Scarlett marched out, fully dressed, with her hands planted on her hips. "I don't want you here," she gritted out through clenched teeth.

"Liar," I accused with a chuckle that only seemed to piss her off even more.

"We're not good for each other, Kane. We're toxic. So what's the point of rehashing the past? This was a mistake."

I frowned, irritated that she called what happened between us a mistake. It was anything but, and it was going to happen a

fuck of a lot more. “I think you mean inevitable.”

She threw her hands in the air and huffed, “There’s no talking to you!”

I jumped to my feet and closed the small distance between us, crowding her back against the wall. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to do, baby. So, sit your sexy ass down and talk to me.”

“That’s not—I didn’t mean—I just...”

I raised an eyebrow, silently waiting for her to make the next move. When she raised her chin stubbornly, I was torn between laughing and growling, but ultimately pushed both aside and took control of the situation. “Look, I shouldn’t have phrased it like that. I thought I knew better, that I shouldn’t want you because you betrayed me.” Her expression darkened, and I hurried on before she could yell at me. “I was wrong. Wrong not to give you the chance to explain, wrong for automatically assuming it was you, and wrong when I convinced myself that I shouldn’t want you, that we had no future.”

Despite her acting skills, Scarlett’s emotions played across her face and I was happy that she couldn’t always seem to control herself with me. I liked that I was the only one who could read her. I could see her wavering in her conviction to avoid talking about this—about us., and I was tempted to push her a little more, but I had a feeling that it would only cause her to shut down again.

So, I waited, but my questions were burning a hole in my chest and eventually, I asked, “Was it you, Scarlett? You said I didn’t let you explain, well I’m giving you the chance now.”

Tears welled up in her eyes right before an emotionless mask descended and she shuttered her eyes. *Fuck*. This wouldn’t go any farther tonight, so when she pushed against my chest, I took several steps back.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” she intoned as she walked over to the trailer door and opened it, a clear message that she wanted me to leave.

My instincts were telling me to stay, but my brain knew better. She needed some breathing room so that she didn't lock the door on "us" before I had a chance to show her we were meant to be.

I padded to the door, but before I stepped out, I leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "This isn't over, Scarlett."

She swallowed hard, but didn't respond, so I forced myself to walk down the steps and head toward my trailer.

After a few minutes, I glanced back and was relieved to see her standing in the doorway watching me. Somehow, I knew it meant the figurative door was still open, too.



SCARLETT AVOIDED TALKING TO ME—OTHER than on set—for a few days. I let her get away with it because I had a some things I wanted to do before we had another conversation. First, I'd gone to Ryder and asked him to put me in touch with someone who could hunt down the truth behind the fake news fiasco. I already knew it hadn't been Scarlett and was metaphorically kicking my ass up and down Hollywood Boulevard for being so stupid. But, I hoped by finding out who had really been behind the incident, it would help us move past it.

The other thing I'd used the time for was to show Scarlett that I wanted her, and I wouldn't give up. I popped up in random places to give her chocolate—her biggest weakness—or flowers or just another chaste kiss on her forehead. Those practically killed me, but I reminded myself that she was worth it. I never stuck around long enough to share more than a few words, and after a while, she stopped looking like a deer in headlights whenever I appeared. In fact, when I caught up with her on her jog this morning, she'd smiled at me, the corners of her eyes crinkling, telling me she was pleased to see me. We'd run in companionable silence, enjoying each other's company without the need to fill the quiet.

When we arrived back at the studio, I walked her to her trailer and leaned in, kissing her cheek this time.

“Kane...”

I’d turned to walk away, so I pivoted around when she said my name. “Yeah, baby?”

She pursed her lips, which shouldn’t be sexy, but anything she did with that perfect mouth inspired dirty thoughts. After a few seconds, she shook her head and whispered, “Nothing.” Then she jogged up the stairs and entered her trailer.

I wanted to follow her, but I had a plan and I was going to stick to it. Today, I wouldn’t take no for an answer. She would hear me out whether she wanted to or not. So, I made my way back to my trailer to shower and change before my call time. A few hours later, I’d left hair and makeup and was on my way to wardrobe when my phone rang. A glance at the screen stopped me in my tracks, and I rushed to answer. “Did you find anything?”

The woman on the other end of the line relayed the information I’d been seeking, and my free hand balled into a fist. “Thanks,” I gritted out after she finished.

When I hung up, I barely stopped myself from throwing my phone at the wall.

I didn’t care what it took. I wouldn’t rest until she was ruined.

Eight



SCARLET

The last few days had been heaven and hell.

I wouldn't have thought it possible to look forward to and dread someone's presence at the same time.

And with tonight being Christmas Eve...I wasn't sure what to feel this year.

My family and I were very close, and my parents and sisters had moved to California shortly after I made my second film. We'd always spent Christmas together, but I'd been so angry the last two Christmases that I'd come to hate the holiday. They would be absolutely shocked if I showed up on Christmas Day without being coerced, threatened, or bribed.

With Kane was worming his way back into my heart with his sweet, respectful gestures, I found my "bah humbug" attitude fading. I kept expecting Kane to push me, but when it didn't happen, I began to believe he'd changed. That perhaps he'd found more patience and wouldn't jump to conclusions in the future. However, I was terrified of being wrong.

"Good morning, Vienna," I greeted my PA with a big smile when she entered the dressing room. "Merry Christmas Eve."

"Hey! Merry Christmas! So, I..." she chattered on about things I knew I should pay attention to, but I hadn't been able to shake off the dreamy fog I'd found myself in after my run this morning. I'd never been a big fan of running. I did it to burn off all the chocolate I couldn't resist eating. This morning was the first time I'd ever relaxed and enjoyed myself. When Kane walked me back to my trailer, I'd almost invited him to

come in and shower with me but thought better of it at the last moment. Sex would not solve the issues between us. I wasn't sure anything could. I didn't want to spend my life on pins and needles, afraid that Kane would never truly trust me and waiting for the day when it all blew up in my face.

"On set in five, Scarlett," Cam called out to me, her head poking through the partially opened door.

"Thanks," I replied with a nod, and she smiled before disappearing.

I answered a few more questions for Vienna, then visited the makeshift hair and makeup table in the back near the catering. They touched up everything, straightened my costume, then gave me a thumbs up and sent me on my way. They were wrapping up a scene, so I sat in a chair behind the film crew and watched the magic unfold. We really had lucked out with the cast for this movie. Somehow, Julianna had signed some of the best people I'd ever worked with. And those I hadn't met, I knew by reputation.

As the scene before me unfolded, it pulled me into the fictional world that we'd created. I ran over lines in my head, immersing myself in the scene and getting in touch with the emotions. I left Hollywood and Scarlett Cassidy behind, stepping into the shoes of Bianca and walking into her world.

When I felt a presence beside me, I glanced up to see Kane staring down at me with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine. Or maybe it was Hunter looking at Bianca. The scene we were about to film was another fight, one where the couple breaks up—before Santa brings them back together, of course.

"Scarlett! Kane!" Luca grunted. "Places."

Kane gestured for me to go first, so I stood and walked onto the set.

Once we were directed into the right positions and the camera was rolling, I looked at my co-star and saw only Hunter.

“There is no us, Hunter,” I said tiredly. “It would take a Christmas miracle to mend what’s broken between us.”

Kane was silent for a beat, and I waited for him to say his line—*Santa doesn’t bring presents to naughty little girls, Bianca.*

“What about an honest apology and a lot of groveling?”

I’d been staring at the ground, but my head whipped up at Kane’s ad-libbed line.

“I should have trusted you,” he went on.

I expected Luca to call for another take any second, but as Kane continued, and not a word was spoken by anyone else.

“There’s no excuse for acting like a fucking asshole. But I can give you an explanation”—his expression was already somber, but a different kind of sorrow crossed his face when he finished—“I have no right to ask you to listen since I never gave you the same courtesy. But I’m not above begging, baby.”

He took a single step closer and watched me warily as though he expected me to run away. However, in the last few days, I’d realized that I wanted to clear the air between us. Maybe then I could finally move on. *Because that’s what I should do...right?*

“Why?” I croaked as tears clogged my throat.

“I was jaded before I met you. Experience had taught me that trusting led to pain and disappointment. So, I pushed you away the moment I had a reason to.”

“I don’t understand.” A tear slipped down my cheek, and he used his thumb to wipe it away.

Kane took two steps forward so that he was almost toe to toe with me and took my hands in his. “You scared me, baby. I’d never felt anything as strong as the emotions and attraction that I felt for you.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened them, the dark blue pools held no barriers and I felt like I was staring into his soul. “You have more power to hurt me than anyone ever has. So, yeah. I was

terrified of you because I knew you had the power to crush my heart. When the opportunity to sabotage what we were building presented itself, I made the biggest mistake of my life.”

I untangled my hands from his and put them in my back pockets. “I can accept your explanation. Even forgive you”—His shoulders sagged, and I winced because I wasn’t finished and he wouldn’t like what I had to say—“But I’m not sure that’s enough.”

Kane stiffened once more and crossed his arms over his chest, his hands gripping his biceps with white knuckles. He often stood like this when he was frustrated, and I could tell that he was holding himself back from touching me. “What can I do to make this right?”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair as I shuffled my weight from one foot to the other. “I don’t think you can. Trust is a two-way street, and it wasn’t only yours that was broken. I don’t want to spend my life waiting for the other shoe to drop. Like you said, you have the power to crush me. I don’t think I’d survive it again.”

Kane closed the gap between us and encircled me in his arms. “That’s the answer.”

“What?”

“Mutual destruction, baby.” A small, crooked smile curled his lips. “One cannot be crushed without the other.”

His logic surprised me, and my eyebrows rose. “So...we trust each other because we can’t survive without one another?”

“Exactly.” His head dipped low until our mouths were only a breath apart. “But there is something else that binds us altogether.”

I cocked my head to the side and asked curiously, “What’s that?”

“Love,” he growled before he sealed his lips over mine.

The kiss was so full of emotion that it nearly took my breath away. And the passion between us burst to life, making me weak in the knees. I curled my arms around Kane's neck and went up on my tiptoes, tangling my tongue with his. I wanted to crawl up his body like a fucking tree, and I was seconds away from doing it when—

“Cut!”

The word was shouted through a megaphone, and when I went to spring apart, Kane held me close, burying his face in my neck. “Fuck,” he grunted.

“Kane,” I hissed. “Let me go.”

“No. I don't want to, but also...I'm gonna need a minute.” That's when I realized I could feel his thick, long shaft pressing into my hip.

“Oh.” I pressed my lips together, but I couldn't stop my shoulders from shaking.

He raised his head and pouted. “Are you seriously laughing at me right now, red?”

I glared at him for using that stupid nickname, but I couldn't help it, and after a second, burst into laughter. When I heard the director call my name, I remembered where we were and quickly sobered. *Oops.*

Grimacing, I turned my head toward the director and squeaked, “Yeah?”

Kane sighed and stood up straight, then turned my back to his front and shifted me so I was blocking any view of his... very impressive hard-on. *Just saying.*

“Sorry, Luca,” he muttered. “I promise to stick to the script this time. Take two?”

To my shock and—I couldn't decide if I was horrified or amused—he shook his head, his eyes on a clipboard as he signed something.

“No. That's a wrap for this scene. We'll pick up on the twenty-seventh for close up shots and some transitions with

your doubles.” Then he turned to one of his assistants, already moving on to the next thing on his agenda.

I glanced up at Kane to see him also staring at the director with a stunned expression.

“He’s keeping that in the movie?” I hissed.

After a moment, Kane seemed to break out of his trance and roared with laughter.

I couldn’t help but see the hilarity in the situation, and I found myself laughing so hard that tears streamed down my cheeks. Even though the dialogue between us felt real, and would need to be revisited, breaking up the heavy with the lighthearted was very cleansing. But as I calmed down, I wondered if Kane’s solution would be enough to heal the rift between us. And I was reeling from what he’d said right before he kissed me. Had he meant it? Or was he just adding something for effect in the movie scene? Before I was forced to deal with this situation, I needed to think. “I’m going to head home. We’ll talk tomorrow, okay?” I murmured, giving him a soft smile, so he knew I wasn’t dismissing what had just happened.

“I don’t think so,” he muttered. The next thing I knew, I was tossed over his shoulder in a fireman’s hold before Kane marched off set.

“Hey! Put me down!” I snapped.

“Not happening.”

I tried reasoning next. “Wardrobe is going to kick our asses if we leave in these clothes.”

“Don’t care.”

“Help!” I shouted. When my plea only resulted in a few chuckles and the rest of the people ignoring what was happening, I yelled, “This is kidnapping!”

There was more laughter, and a few Merry Christmases, but no one made a move to help. “I hope you all get coal in your stocking!” I shouted. We exited the building into the

morning sunshine and headed who the fuck knew where. I was facing backward, after all.

I glanced down and smirked. *Not a terrible view.*

Nine



Once we were outside, Scarlett settled down, probably accepting that squirming and squalling for help wouldn't do her any good.

I went straight to my trailer and stomped up the steps before flinging the door open. Sheldon, my PA, was sitting at the small table in the kitchenette, typing on his computer. "Out," I grunted as I carried Scarlett inside.

Sheldon shut his computer and hopped up, then skedaddled right out.

"That was rude," Scarlett huffed.

I flipped her over into my arms and gently set her on the couch. "Like walking away from a serious discussion before it's finished?" Her cheeks heated, and I lost my focus for a second. Scarlett was one of the most confident women I'd ever met. I could count on one hand the times I'd seen her blush. And fuck, was it sexy. Especially when I knew that pretty pink would spread down her whole body when she was in the throes of passion.

There would be plenty of time for that later. I needed to get my head on straight, so I thought about anything that would make my dick limp and softened it enough for me to put my mind somewhere other than what it was going to feel like to slide inside Scarlett's pussy.

For fuck's sake, Remington. Stop thinking with the wrong head.

I took a deep breath and met Scarlett's turquoise eyes. She looked hesitant, but not closed off—and there was a glimmer in their depths that bolstered my belief that this would work out, eventually.

“It was a lot to take in,” she said. “I thought it would be good to take some time and digest it before we talked again. I wasn't avoiding the discussion.”

I believed her. That wasn't my problem.

“I know that. But I also know you better than you think I do, and I'm not about to let you spend the night talking yourself into making us both miserable.”

“I wasn't—”

“Baby,” I sighed as I sat down beside her. “You are one of the most level-headed people I've ever met. Until it comes to you and me.” I scratched my head and mused, “I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad one.” Then I shrugged. “Regardless, I'm not going to let you get inside your head where the irrational part of you tries to justify bullshit.”

Most people would have been offended by that assessment, but Scarlett relaxed back into the cushions and muttered, “Fine then, Mr. Remington. Was there more that you wanted to say?”

I almost snorted a laugh and told her there was much more I'd rather do, but I doubted that would help with anything. “There are many things I'd like to say, Ms. Cassidy. But how about I start with some news I received today? Then we can revisit the bomb I clearly dropped on you earlier.”

Scarlett squirmed a little, and I knew I'd hit the nail on the head. I'd guessed it was my comment about love that had sent her reeling, but I was serious when I told her I wouldn't let her have time to twist everything in her head and talk herself out of giving us a chance. However, I was willing to give her a slight reprieve by clearing the air over the incident two years ago.

“I asked Ryder for a favor, and he put me in touch with a PI, Finely, who did a little digging. I should have done it two years ago, but I think we are both in agreement that I was

being a bull-headed asshole who refused to see the truth right in front of me.”

“Truth?” Scarlett prompted when I paused for an extended period.

“We’ll come back to that,” I assured her. “Anyway, she called me today with the information I’d asked her to find.”

“The leak?” Scarlett asked quietly.

I nodded. “I wanted to know who it was because I already knew it wasn’t you,” I clarified.

She raised an eyebrow and opened her mouth, but I cut her off.

“Like I said, stubborn asshole. Once I stopped lying to myself and admitted the truth about why I’d reacted the way I did, I also had to accept that deep down, I always knew it wasn’t you.”

“But—”

I placed a finger over her mouth, then traced her lips softly. “Stop distracting me,” I teased.

Scarlett rolled her eyes and made a gesture for me to continue.

“Three years ago, I started receiving letters from a secret admirer. When it became clear the stalker knew a little too much about me, I had them investigated, and it turned out to be my PA, Janice. She’d always been a little overly friendly with me, but she did nothing that warranted more than a frown and a reminder to be professional in the workplace. And she was extremely good at her job, so I let it slide.

“When I learned she was the stalker, I immediately fired her. But, somehow, I’d missed the signs that she was seriously unstable. Her actions had been so subtle that I never suspected she’d actually built a whole imaginary world where she and I were together and in love. She had a complete breakdown, and I ended up paying for her to spend some time in an institution where she could get the help she needed.”

Scarlett's mouth had formed an O, and her eyes were wide. Finally, she asked, "But, if she was in the hospital, how would she know about us?"

I grunted in frustration, still irritated that I hadn't been as proactive as I should have with my security. "Janice was mentally ill, but she wasn't stupid. In her mind, we were together, but she was always suspicious and worried that I was cheating on her. So, she'd installed a device on my computer that gave her access to everything. And since my phone is also linked to my computer..."

"The texts between us," Scarlett concluded.

"And the dinner reservation."

"Did she take the pictures?"

I shook my head. "No, that was all Mandi."

Scarlett pursed her lips for a moment, then snarled, "She really is a bitch, isn't she?"

"Oh, babe, you have no idea," I muttered. "A few weeks after this all went down, Mandi showed up at my house."

"For what? To try to excuse her actions or something?" Scarlett supposed, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Or something," I ground out. The next words put a bitter taste in my mouth. "She was wearing a coat and when I answered the door, she opened it."

"No," Scarlett gasped, smacking both of her hands over her face.

"Yeah, I don't think I'll ever be able to unsee that." I cringed. "*So much plastic*. She looked like a fucking Barbie doll."

Scarlett was quiet for so long that when I glanced at her, I expected to see her fuming. Instead, her eyes were squeezed shut, her hands still covering her mouth, and her shoulders were shaking with silent laughter.

"It wasn't funny, red," I grunted. "I'm scarred for life."

She glared at me and snapped, “Don’t call me red.” But her irritation was overshadowed when she burst into laughter again.

“I’m so happy you are amused by this,” I said dryly. “Anyway, getting back on topic. Once I thought about it, I realized there was a pattern, but I never truly put it together until now.”

“A pattern?”

“I don’t know how I missed it. I truly feel like an idiot. Most of my relationships—and I use that word loosely—ended when news broke about something they’d done. Cheated, lied, whatever, I often found out via the paps. After I talked to the PI, I realized Mandi seemed to be around a lot more often after those “breakups.” I used air quotes because I didn’t think three or fewer dates qualified for the term breakup, and I couldn’t think of anyone I’d gone on over three dates with in the last decade. I didn’t date much at all, actually.

“Finley found out that Mandi paid Janice five grand for the information on where we went and anything she could dig up that Mandi could use to stop our relationship from progressing. After that, Finley kept looking and found trails to every woman she outed to me. She’d paid for the leak. She wasn’t just getting tips, she was hunting them down.”

“Well, shit,” Scarlett breathed. “Mandi is quite the psycho, isn’t she?”

“Agreed. But, don’t worry, she’ll get what’s coming to her.”

“Oh?” Scarlett looked way too eager, and it made me laugh.

“Finley found some shit on her, and I’m working on a plan. When I’m done, she’ll be leaving town with her devil tail between her legs. No one will even speak to her, much less give her information or hire her.”

“It’s not enough,” Scarlett grumped, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I like this bloodthirsty side of you,” I teased...not completely joking.

Scarlett shrugged. “Not much phases me, but I can be a ruthless bitch if you hurt someone I care about.”

I wanted to jump on her comment and ask if that included me, but it could wait. I owed her to lay out my feelings first, to show her I was willing to risk it.

“Are you ready to talk about us?” I raised a challenging brow.

Rather than take the bait, she simply narrowed her eyes and took her time thinking it over. “Yes,” she answered after a couple of tense minutes. “You were saying something about knowing it wasn’t me?”

“I held on to my anger for a long time,” I admitted softly, taking her hand in mine and playing with her fingers. “I used it to convince myself that I’d done the right thing. But what you said the other day...it forced me to look back and see what really happened.”

Scarlett turned in her seat a little so that she could look at me without twisting her neck. “What do you mean?”

“Baby, everything I said on set was true. I was so afraid to trust you, I grasped onto the moment of doubt I had and blew it up to epic proportions. We were so new...we hadn’t really even started,” I shook my head and looked at the ceiling. “I’d like to think that if we’d been together longer, things would have been different.” I returned my gaze to her face and admitted, “But the truth is, it probably would have gone down the same way.”

Scarlett tried to pull her hand away, but I wouldn’t let her. “Let me finish before the crazy in you gets a hold of my words and starts twisting them.”

She gasped, but there was a slight lift to the corners of her mouth. “I don’t have any crazy.”

Leaning in until my lips were at her ear, I whispered, “I really hope that’s not true. I have all kinds of crazy ideas I was

hoping to try out with you.” She shivered, and I licked up the shell of her ear. “Most of them should really be done naked.”

Her quick inhale made me grin, but I put it away before sitting back. “Anyway, I’ve been in this business since I was five years old. Twenty-seven years is a long fucking time in this industry, so I don’t think it will surprise you that I’ve had some terrible experiences with social climbers, coat-tail riders, and gold diggers.”

Scarlett’s features softened with sympathy, and she nodded. “I suppose that would make it difficult to trust anyone.”

“That doesn’t excuse how I treated you,” I told her as I ran the tip of one finger along her jawline. “Scarlett, I knew from the moment I met you that you could become my entire world.”

Her perfect mouth curved up and the glimmer in her turquoise orbs got stronger.

“It’s taken me two years to get my head out of my ass and come to grips with the fact that my life is empty without you. Protecting my heart from you—which is a lost cause, by the way—just dooms me to a cold and lonely life. And even if it means that it’ll end up crushed someday, I’d rather take the chance and spend however long I can holding you in my arms every night, waking up with you in the morning, and making you smile,”—I smiled wickedly—“and scream, as often as possible.”

She didn’t seem to realize that throughout my speech, she’d been scooting closer and closer. Now she was practically in my lap, so I grasped her hips and moved her over me, settling her astride my legs.

“How about you, baby? Will you take a leap of faith with me and give us another chance?”

Ten



SCARLET

I hated that Kane and I had spent the past two years not only apart, but living with pain and regret, even if in the end, it seemed like it had been necessary. Now that I understood why he'd assumed the worst back then...and after he'd put his apology out there for the whole world to see, I wasn't going to waste any more time with him.

So, when he asked me to take a chance on us, I didn't hesitate. "Yes," I said softly as I slid my palms up his broad chest and gripped his shoulders through his shirt before leaning up to brush my lips against his. Kane wasn't hiding his feelings behind a mask anymore, and his blue eyes burned with desire. When I swiped my tongue across his bottom lip, the color deepened to navy, but I didn't have long to appreciate his reaction because he tossed me over his shoulder again. Only this time, I didn't struggle. Instead, I groped his ass and his deep chuckle filled the interior of his trailer.

After he tossed me onto his mattress, I grinned up at him. "You can't blame me for copping a feel when I've been ogling your butt every chance I got over the past two years."

"I won't hold it against you, just so long as you realize that turnabout is fair play. I intend to do all the things I've dreamed about doing to you since before our first date."

I quirked a brow, my smile widening. "I guess that depends on what kinds of things you've been fantasizing about all this time."

“I’m going to have a fuck of a lot of fun showing you.” He punctuated his sensual promise by ripping his shirt over his head and thumbing open the snap on his jeans.

Eager to be skin to skin with him, I scrambled to my knees and lifted the hem of my shirt.

“Stop right there, baby,” Kane growled. “Stripping you bare is one of the first fantasies I’m going to turn into reality. You’re going to be my favorite present to unwrap from now on.”

A delicious shiver raced down my spine as I dropped my hands to my sides. “Next time I’ll wear a bow,” I teased with a smirk. “And nothing else.”

Kane’s blue eyes darkened to almost black, and he growled as he prowled toward me. When he climbed onto the mattress, his gaze locked with mine and my panties practically disintegrated. His jeans were riding low on his hips and I licked my lips as I stared at the happy trail pointing toward the impressive bulge in his jeans.

“That fucking mouth of yours,” he groaned, brushing his thumb against my bottom lip. “It’s so damn perfect. You could drive a man wild without even trying.”

Driving him wild sounded wonderful to me. “How about you hurry and get me naked and we’ll see just how wild I can make you?”

“I can abso-fucking-lutely do that.” He dropped his head to claim my mouth in a deep kiss that left me breathless. I whimpered when he finally pulled back, but he just gave me a wicked smile. “But my fantasy of having these perfect lips wrapped around my cock is going to have to wait. I want to feel your pussy sucking me deep when I come with you the first time, and there’s no way in hell I’ll last if you get your mouth on me. I’ve been waiting too long for this.”

The hope that I was afraid to feel—that he was talking about more than just wanting me for the past two years—must have shown on my face, because he nodded. “Yeah, baby. I want you more than anything, but this first time won’t last

long. I need you so damn much because I've only gotten off with my fantasies of you all this time."

My heart soared at his confession. "I haven't been with anyone else either."

"Good," he grunted. "Then I don't need to kick someone's ass for taking what's mine, even if I've been too damn stubborn to see it."

"It also means we don't have to use a condom since I'm on the pill," I offered.

"You gonna let me take you bare, baby?"

I nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Fuck, yeah," he growled before quickly stripping my clothes from my body until I was sprawled naked on the bed while he kneeled above me in only his jeans. "I've never gone without a condom, but I have a feeling it's gonna make it even more difficult to hold out until I give you a couple of orgasms." He shook his head and exhaled slowly as he raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Knowing there won't be anything between us..." Our eyes met once more and I could see he was struggling to maintain control. "I can't wait to feel your sweet pussy wrapped around my cock."

"I wouldn't be too sure," I murmured breathlessly. "I probably won't last very long either since I've never done it without—"

He cut off my confession with a brutal kiss. "I know it's a double-standard with what I just told you, but I can't listen to you about anyone but me, baby."

The possessive gleam in his eyes gave me a feminine thrill that turned into a rush of pleasure when he moved down my body to suck on one of my nipples while he used his fingers to toy with the other. By the time he'd given both breasts plenty of his attention, I was writhing beneath him. He trailed kisses down my belly, then wedged his shoulders between my thighs and parted my pussy lips with his thumbs as he met my gaze over my mound. He stared at my tattoo for an extended minute, then looked up at my face. "Next time, I'm going to

hunt down every tattoo on your body and trace them with my tongue.” He watched me intently as his hands slid under my butt to lift me up to his mouth so he could lick me. The first touch of his tongue was a gentle swipe over my tattoo, the next was up my seam from bottom to top. “Fuck, you taste good,” he groaned in a guttural voice. “You’re fucking drenched.” He licked me again before asking, “Is that all for me?”

“Mmmhmmm,” I moaned.

He grinned. “Good, because I’m already addicted to your taste.”

Then he swirled his tongue around my little bundle of nerves, and I pressed my head back against the pillow as I clenched the comforter with my fists. “I’m not sure I can take much more of that,” I whimpered.

“Don’t hold back, baby. Come for me. Show me how much you enjoy my mouth eating your succulent pussy. Let me hear it.”

All the dirty talk was throwing kindling on the fire inside me. I whimpered and moaned as he used his lips, tongue, and fingers to drive me over the edge. Then I gave him exactly what he wanted, crying out his name as I fell apart. He didn’t wait for my shudders to stop. He just kept licking and sucking until I tumbled into my second release. His licks eased off and became gentle, lazily licking me clean. Then he sat up and shoved his jeans down his legs before kicking them off.

Slowly, he positioned himself between my thighs, keeping his eyes on me, almost as if he was afraid that I would change my mind. I caressed his cheek and leaned up to kiss him before giving him a cheeky smile and teasing, “There’s no going back now.”

His mouth curved up, and he notched the tip of his shaft at my entrance.

My fingers tunneled into his hair and I held his head as I stared into his deep, blue depths and whispered, “This is us, Kane. Together.”

“Finally, right where we belong,” he murmured before taking my mouth in a deep kiss that had my body burning with need.

“Yes,” I agreed with a sigh. I twined my arms around his shoulders to pull him close as he entered me with one powerful thrust.

Then he stilled, anchored deep in my body, giving me a moment to adjust to his size. “You good, baby?” he rasped, clearly struggling to hold on to his control.

Bending my knees, I cradled his hips with my legs and gave him a dreamy smile. “Better than good, I’m amazing.”

“Thank fuck,” he groaned as he rocked against me.

“More,” I urged him as he started off slow. “Don’t hold back.” Tossing his words back at him seemed to flip a switch because his thrusts became more forceful and he sped up until he was slamming in and out of me so hard, I briefly wondered if the trailer was rocking along with us. Not that I cared. My mind was consumed with the pleasure building inside me again. Nothing else mattered in that moment except being with Kane.

“I knew you’d have a tight little pussy,” he grunted. “But I love how fucking slick you are. Love that it’s all for me.” My inner walls fluttered at his praise, which only seemed to spur him on. “I own this pussy now,” he growled, punctuating his statement with a forceful thrust. “Only my cock from now on. Do you understand, Scarlet?”

“Yes,” I hissed. My answer ripped out of me as he slid his hand between our bodies to circle my clit with his thumb. My orgasm crashed over me, and I screamed his name as my head spun and stars danced in front of my eyes. Clutching his shoulders, I held on tight as wave after wave of ecstasy threatened to carry me away.

“That’s it, baby,” he muttered. “Fuck, yeah. Milk me cock. Make me come. Fuck!” He bellowed the last word as he punched his hips forward a few more times, then anchored himself deep and buried his face in the crook of my neck. Jets

of hot come spurting from his dick, filling me with warmth and pushing me over the edge one more time.

When the pleasure finally ebbed, Kane collapsed on top of me, and pressed me into the mattress for a moment before rolling to his side. Then he slid his arm under my back so he could pull me onto his chest and arrange my body so I was sprawled on top of him.

“Damn, Remington,” I panted. “If this is your tamest fantasy, I’m not sure I’ll survive the next one.”

Kane tossed his head back against the mattress and my body bounced on his as he laughed heartily. “Fuck, I love you,” he murmured when his mirth subsided.

I was silent and still, processing his declaration, and he didn’t push, just held me while I worked everything out in my mind. The fact that he hadn’t immediately demanded to hear me say it back, that he gave me metaphorical space, just proved what I’d already accepted. Kane was it for me. My everything. “I love you, too.”

He’d done an amazing job hiding his anxiety, because I was shocked when his whole body sagged with relief and he blew out a heavy breath before grunting, “Thank fuck.”

His arms tightened around me, and he kissed my temple. “Would you spend Christmas with me, Scarlet?” he queried softly.

I folded my arms over his chest and propped my head on them so I could look at his face. “I’d love to spend the rest of the day with you, Kane, but I promised my family I’d come over in the morning.”

He tucked some wayward hair behind my ear and gave me a gentle smile. “I get it. My mom is pretty pissed at me for not coming home for Christmas.”

An idea popped into my head, but I hesitated, wondering if it was too soon. Then I decided to just go for it. “I was thinking...my family actually has their big celebration on Christmas Eve, but I’ve put my foot down the last two years and only spent Christmas Day with them.”

A guilty expression covered Kane's face, and I leaned up to give him a quick kiss. "Stop it. It's all in the past, and we're moving on."

One corner of his mouth lifted, and he traced my jaw as he replied, "Go on, baby. What's your idea?"

"Well, what if we head to my parents' house for dinner tonight and stay for breakfast in the morning? Then we'll drive down to San Diego and surprise your mom. Our call time the next day isn't until two, so we have plenty of time to come back that day."

Kane smiled and cupped my face in his palms. "I don't deserve you, Scarlet. But never expect me to let you go."

I beamed at him. "You like my plan?"

"My mom is going to adore you, baby."

I hoped he was right.

"And I'd love to meet your family."

His words made me cringe suddenly, thinking about how my sisters were going to react. "You might regret it when you meet my sisters."

He just laughed and kissed me until I was breathless. "I'll win them over, eventually."

I knew he would, and that made me feel much better.

We laid in silence for a while, just soaking up the peace of being in each other's arms. But eventually, the heat between our naked bodies and his cock—which hadn't softened much—pressing into my stomach filled my head with dirty thoughts.

"Kane?"

He opened his eyes and smiled at me. "Yeah, baby?"

"So...about driving you wild..."

Eleven



I glanced up to see Scarlett poking her head around the corner, her eyes scanning my kitchen.

When we returned from our visits to our families, which had been more fun than I expected, I'd taken Scarlett straight to my house and informed her it was now *our* house. I'd expected a little pushback, so I'd been overjoyed when she just shrugged and said, "Okay."

We were moving her stuff in the day after New Year's. I couldn't fucking wait to spend every day with her for the rest of our lives.

I repressed a smile when she spotted me at the island, drinking coffee, and reading a magazine. She slowly entered, almost as if she were approaching a wild animal, and once she saw the title of the magazine, her expression fell. She was so damn cute, I had to swallow my laughter.

"You saw it?" she asked with a wince.

"Yeah, Red, I saw it."

She glared at me, forgetting all her nervousness, which had been my intention when I used the nickname. She still got irritated when I called her that, but lately, it seemed like it was all bluster. I suspected she was actually coming to like it. Especially since she and I were the only ones who knew what it meant.

"Come here, Scarlett," I demanded, though I kept my voice gentle. I held out my hand and she immediately shuffled

over and let me pull her onto my lap. “Why are you worried, baby? I know it wasn’t you.”

She sighed and wrapped her arms around me, burying her face in my chest. “This is going to take some getting used to.”

“I get that,” I replied with a nod. “It’s only been a week, baby. But I’ll tell you as many times as it takes for it to sink in. I love you. I trust you. You are everything to me.”

Her muscles unclenched and she melted into me, then she spotted the magazine in my hand again and huffed. “How the hell did they find out already?”

I lifted her face to mine with a finger under her chin, then I gave her my best Cheshire Cat grin. “It was my fault this time.”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. “Your fault?”

I winked before admitting, “I called Farrah.” Farrah was the editor of the magazine that had run a story about us. I’d met her a couple of times and liked her, so when I broke the news, I gave her the exclusive.

“Pardon?” Scarlett looked flabbergasted—not that I blamed her.

“Baby, I don’t want to hide this, us. You aren’t a dirty little secret—although I suggest we tuck that away in the fantasy box for another day.” She giggled, and her cheeks bloomed with pink, making me grin. “I don’t care if this article brings every reporter to our door. I’m head over fucking heels in love with you, and since this is forever, I see no reason to keep it private.”

She stared at me with something akin to awe on her face, and I kissed her on the nose. “Don’t look at me like that, Scarlett. I’m bound to break any pedestal you put me on.”

Scarlett burst out laughing and touched her forehead to mine. “Don’t worry, babe. I’m well aware of your flaws. But that doesn’t mean I don’t see you as my hero. And this”—she gestured to the glossy pages that had a spread about our relationship—“was a sweet gesture. Thank you.” She brushed

a tender kiss across my lips before laying her head on my chest once more.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you, Scarlett,” I murmured into her hair.

I smiled when I heard a muffled snicker. “Just keep supplying me with orgasms, and it’s unlikely you’ll ever have to worry about that.”

Laughing, I scooped her into my arms as I shot up from my barstool. “Well then, I better start this day off right.”

Scarlett giggled all the way to the bedroom, but an hour later, she was screaming my name as I made her come for the third time.

“Figured I’d put a couple in the bank,” I told her as I curled myself around her body, feeling happier and more content than I’d ever thought possible.



“YOU LOOK UNBELIEVABLE, BABY,” I whispered as I came up behind Scarlett and put my hands on her hips. We were headed to the studio for the big New Year’s Eve bash.

She beamed at me in the mirror as she finished putting in an earring. Her dress was made of dark purple satin, and it hugged her every curve. The neckline dipped just low enough to show off some cleavage, and I knew I’d be drooling over her all damn night. It didn’t help that her hair hung in soft waves down her back because I kept picturing holding a fistful as I bent her over and shoved her skirt up so I could fuck her from behind.

“You’re looking pretty hot yourself.” She winked at me and my hands clenched. Her expression turned admonishing, and she flipped around to glare at me. “Don’t even think about it. I’m not going to this party looking freshly fucked.”

I laughed and forced myself to take a step back, then swept my gaze down and up her body once more. “Hmmm. Your outfit is missing something.”

Scarlett's brow rose as she looked down at herself. "No. Well, I mean, I haven't put my shoes on, but—"

"No," I interrupted as I guided her around to face the mirror again, then reached into my pocket for the item I wanted her to wear. "You're definitely missing something."

She frowned at me and started to speak, then froze when I curled my arms around her and lifted her left hand to slide a ring onto the third finger.

"There," I said smugly. "Now, you're ready to go."

Scarlett sucked in a breath and raised her hand in front of her face, staring at the seven-carat diamond ring sparkling on her hand.

"Is this...? Are you...?"

I chuckled as I released her, then moved to stand in front of her. I dropped to one knee and stared up at the best thing that had ever happened to me. "Scarlett Cassidy, will you marry me?"

"Yes!" she screamed, and as soon as I stood up, she flung herself into my arms.

I brought my lips down on hers in a deep, soul binding kiss.

When we finally arrived at the party later, she didn't seem to mind that she looked freshly fucked.

Epilogue



SCARLET

The Avalon Club was the perfect venue for our New Year's Eve wrap party. The venue was ultra-modern, with a sleek black lacquered bar centered in the expansive, black and white chevron-floored room. Walls covered in glittering gold letters led to a raw oak slat ceiling, and the flickering lights of the metallic curtains made the bottles of champagne sparkle. The brick walls were adorned with the artwork of Lucas Moretto, a talented artist who'd designed spaces for several A List celebrities.

A live band was playing laid back jazz and blues music on a small stage at the back of the room, providing the perfect ambiance as the guests talked and laughed and enjoyed the extensive selection of finger foods beautifully laid out on the table running the length of one wall.

The place was buzzing as I sipped my champagne and scanned the room with satisfaction, taking in the merry scene before me. *Damn, I'm good.*

Santa better watch out, or I might be stealing his job.

Christmas had been my favorite time of year for as long as I could remember, and spreading cheer was one of my favorite parts. If I could sprinkle a little love in there, I was all the merrier.

When I wrote *The Naughty List*, I did it with a very specific cast and crew in mind. I'd worked with everyone at one time or another. This group of Hollywood humbuggers

were all people I'd come to care about, and I wanted them to truly experience the joy of the season.

And yes, I might have rubbed my hands together in anticipation of a little matchmaking...

Maybe it was because I'd also recently found love. My festive matchmaking had resulted in a completely unexpected but wonderful union with the woman of my dreams—and she'd been only too eager to help me with my scheming. I might have picked the perfect cast and crew in the hope of Christmas love-match miracles, but my beautiful soulmate had gifted me with a happily ever after of my own.

As if my thoughts had summoned her, Julianna sidled up next to me. “You’re looking awfully proud of yourself, Mr. Saint,” she teased.

I slipped my arm around her waist, drinking in her flushed cheeks and gorgeous smile. “Can you blame me, Mrs. Saint?”

My wife chuckled, and the twinkling lights caused the ring on her left hand to sparkle as she raised a flute of champagne to her lips. I'd given Julianna the ring for Christmas and told her I wanted to celebrate the new year as husband and wife, so we'd tied the knot that very morning.

“No, I certainly can't. The number of diamond rings in this room is blinding.”

I laughed and scanned the room again.

Ryder and Charity were cuddled close on one of the leather couches, talking to Jackson and Hailey. I'd laughed hard when I heard about Ryder dressing up like an elf—it was hard to picture the gruff former SEAL in a silly costume. But clearly, it had worked because Charity's joyful gaze flickered between her fiancé's face and the ring on her finger.

The couple was talking with Jackson and Hailey. Those two had been through so much, and I'd been determined to make sure they found the spirit of Christmas this year. Since they were moving in together, I made a mental note to send them a housewarming gift. I would wait until next year,

though...a ten foot Christmas tree was the ideal thing for the happy couple.

I spotted Andrew kissing Maxine under the mistletoe before raising her left hand and kissing the antique gold ring she was wearing. She was going to be an amazing doctor. Although I was sad to see them leaving Hollywood for Texas, I knew they'd be happy.

Scarlett called Andrew's name as she and Kane strolled over to them. I snickered at her flushed cheeks and wild hair. No prizes for guessing what she and Kane had been up to before the party. They were a beautiful couple. Their evident love for each other gave them an unparalleled chemistry, and would make them *the* Hollywood couple. I'd already contacted their agents, and they'd signed on for my next two movies. They'd been extremely happy about sticking together as the leading lady and man.

Scarlett gave Maxine a hug and they admired each other's rings, while the men clapped each other on the back in true "manly" fashion.

Julianna poked me in the side and pointed across the room to where Luca was standing with Audrey. I chuckled when I saw him check his watch impatiently before practically undressing his fiancée with his eyes. I wouldn't be the least surprised to hear they'd run off to Vegas soon.

My gaze drifted to the refreshment table where Landon and Grace were staring at each other with the same googly eyes as all the other couples. They were in much the same state as Kane and Scarlet. Obviously, there'd been quite a bit of "pre-party activities" tonight.

Not that I was one to judge. Julianna was wearing the second dress she'd picked out because I'd torn the first one. I grinned and thought about my plans to rip the other one to ring in the new year.

Kaiden caught my eye as he led Laura over to take a seat in the nook where Ryder, Charity, Jackson, and Hailey were hanging out. I had to smile when I thought about how overprotective he was going to be with his pregnant wife-to-

be. However, Laura would no doubt keep him in line. They balanced each other perfectly.

Abel and Scout were lingering a few feet away, talking with some crew members, but their eyes kept returning to each other. They'd flown back from visiting with her parents in Chicago for the party, giving me the opportunity to gloat about how I'd rigged the lottery so they ended up working together.

The other couples who'd been on my Christmas humbug list eventually made their way over to the same area. Along with several other members of the cast and crew. My chest puffed up a little when I saw all the happy faces.

"That look on your face worries me," Julianna whispered.

"Hmm?" I glanced at her with a raised eyebrow and mischievous smile. "What look?"

"The one that says you're already planning more Hollywood humbug shenanigans for next year."

The band struck up a rendition of Bing Crosby's "Let's Start the New Year Right," and couples took to the dance floor, melting into each other's arms as the last minute of the current year ticked down.

I smiled at Julianna as I stood and linked my hand with hers. "Come on, wife. Let's take Bing's advice."

She laughed as I tugged her to the dance floor and wrapped her up against me. She looped her arms around my neck as we swayed to the music, her eyes so full of love, it made my knees weak.

Ten...Nine...Eight...

The band leader took the mic and began the countdown.

Seven...Six...Five...

"I love you, Mr. Saint," Julianna whispered, her fingers smoothing the hair at my nape.

Four...Three...Two...

"I love you, too, Mrs. Saint," I murmured, cupping her face and tilting it to mine.

I didn't hear the final count, or the cheers of "Happy New Year." I was too busy kissing my wife, and thanking the spirit of Christmases past, present, and future for bringing her into my life.

Epilogue



SCARLET

“O kay, Scarlet, Kane. This is where you’ll kiss. Keep it light since this is the first time they kiss. Remember, they are still strangers, ” Paul, the director, announced as he returned to his seat.

Why was he swaying from side to side as he moved? I blinked a few times and realized it was just my eyes playing tricks on me. They were a little blurry, probably something to do with my stomach twisting and turning. Inhaling slowly through my nose, I reminded myself I only had one more scene before I was done for the day. I’d been feeling a little off, so I wanted to get home and nap before everyone showed up for the Christmas party at our house.

“Baby?” Kane’s low, velvet voice brought me out of my thoughts, and I focused on his worried face. “Are you alright?”

“Super,” I chirped, trying to act better than I felt.

His brow furrowed, but the director called places, and we dove back into our work.

“Can I kiss you?” Kane whispered with a hopeful smile.

“I don’t know...were you a good boy this year?” I teased.

Kane quirked an eyebrow. “If Santa looked like you, I’d have been on my best behavior every year.”

Grinning, I placed my hands on his shoulders and went up onto my tiptoes. “What if this Santa wants you to be naughty?”

I tipped my head back, and Kane's mouth descended toward mine. My stomach lurched the second our lips brushed, and I jumped back, slapping a hand over my mouth. Afraid to throw up on set, I stumbled toward the dressing rooms as fast as I could. I barely made it to the first one with a bathroom before falling to the ground in front of the toilet.

“Scarlet!”

I didn't look up when I heard Kane's frantic voice. I was too busy purging my body of all things, food and drink.

I felt my hair being pulled back from my face, and a warm hand on my back rubbed soothing circles, helping to ease my nausea. Finally, when I finished dry heaving, I sat up, and Kane immediately pulled me back to sit in his lap.

“I knew I shouldn't have let you come today,” he grunted after a minute.

“You and what army were going to stop me, Kane Remington?” I snipped as he helped me stand and walk over to the sink.

“You think your sisters wouldn't help me, Scarlet Remington?”

I glared at him while taking the cup he handed me and rinsed out my mouth. “When did they all suddenly change to Team Kane? I'm their damn sister!”

“A sister who works too hard and is so busy doing stuff for everyone else that she neglects herself.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled. “It's betrayal, no matter how you try to pretty it up.” I took a deep breath and tested my balance, feeling almost normal. “Okay, I'm ready, let's go finish the scene—”

“Have you lost your fucking mind, red?”

I didn't bother scowling at Kane for using the nickname; it had stopped annoying me a long time ago, and he knew it. “I ruined the scene, babe. If we don't get back in there and get done, we'll have to wait until after Christmas to reshoot the whole thing, and Paul will be angry—”

Kane put his hand over my mouth and rolled his eyes. “Paul told me to take you home to rest when I ran after you. The only thing anyone cares about is that you are okay. So, no arguments. We are going home.”

I felt like I should argue, but truthfully, I was tired as hell and ready to go home. “Fine.”

A pleased smile curled Kane’s lips. “I love you,” he murmured, melting all my insides.

“What do you want?” I asked suspiciously. Kane was never shy about telling me, or anyone else, that he loved me. But he was laying the smokey, seductive tone on thick, which meant he was gearing up to talk me into something.

“Nothing, baby. I mean, other than for you to be healthy.”

His expression was far too innocent.

I frowned and watched him closely as he took my hand and gently led me out of the studio into the lot where his Tesla was parked.

Twenty minutes later, I knew why it seemed like he was hiding something.

Natalie and Portia were waiting by our front door when we arrived home. Kane pulled the car into the garage, and my sisters stalked over, waiting until he helped me out before descending on me like a pack of rabid wolves. That might have been a little harsh...but seriously.

“Come with us, A,” Natalie demanded, grabbing my hand and dragging me into the house.

“I don’t know what Kane told you, but I’m fine,” I protested. They both looked at me with an expression our mother had perfected over the years. One that made just about anyone obey without question, although it was more effective coming from your mother rather than your sisters. Still...

Portia held up a little bag from the local drugstore and shook it. “Probably. We brought this to make sure.”

Natalie practically shoved me into the downstairs guest bathroom, then dragged in Portia and slammed the door shut.

Portia pulled out a box and handed it to me. I glanced down, and my breath whooshed out of me. “No way. You really think that might be it?” I gasped.

Natalie put her hands on her hips and smirked. “You’ve been tired as hell lately. At brunch this week, the smell of bacon made you sick, and now you’re throwing up?”

Please, please, please. Let them be right.

“Take the test and find out,” Portia urged.

The toilet was in its own little room, so I let the girls stay while I went to pee on the little stick.

When I was done, I set the test on the sink, washed my hands, and waited.

Kane knocked on the door before the three minutes were up, but I already had my answer.

Portia opened it and murmured something to my husband before she and Natalie slipped away.

“Baby?” Kane frowned as he entered the bathroom and shut the door behind him. “What is going on?”

Speechless, I picked up the test and held it in front of him, making sure the little window that said “Pregnant” was right side up.

“You’re...” His entire face lit up, and a wide grin split his face. “We’re having a baby?” he breathed, slipping his arms around my waist and pulling me close.

“We’re having a baby,” I confirmed, my excitement just as palpable as his.

Kane’s mouth crashed into mine, and he kissed me deeply. “I love you more than anything, Scarlet Remington,” he mumbled against my lips. Then he withdrew, and the look of tenderness on his face brought tears to my eyes—*stupid hormones*.

“I love you, too.”

“And...I have to admit, knowing you’re knocked up makes me hot as fuck.”

Heat rushed through my body, scorching me everywhere and making me desperate for relief. I glanced at my watch and bit my lip. “Everyone will be here in two hours.”

“That’s plenty of time to make you scream at least twice,” drawled Kane, “and still be all cleaned up and gorgeous for the party.”

“You two better not be getting busy in there!” Natalie suddenly yelled through the door.

“It’s my house!” I shouted. “Go find a man to give you orgasms and leave us alone!”

Kane scooped me into his arms and opened the door, ignoring my giggling sisters as he made a beeline for the master suite.

Well over an hour later, I lay naked and sated across my husband’s chest. “Merry Christmas, Kane.”

He snuggled me even closer and rested his palm on my stomach. “Merry Christmas, baby.”

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Elle is a reading addict and a lover of all things books. She has always had a passion for writing and since she is a hopeless romantic, loves an HEA, has a crazy (and dirty) imagination, writing romance came naturally to her.

Elle is married to a real life book boyfriend - a sexy alpha male with a sweet side. He is her inspiration, the love of her life, and her best friend.

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