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Instalove Christmas

Hope Ford

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Totally Smitten

A Cozy AF Christmas

Chapter 1

Baker

“**W**hat’s wrong?” I ask Tara, my administrative assistant. She’s sitting at her desk with a pile of tissues around her. She’s obviously added more tinsel and garland since I left this morning even though I’ve told her over and over the office doesn’t need decorating.

She looks up at me as if she’s surprised to see me standing at the door. She must really be upset if she didn’t hear my dually truck pull up in front of our trailer. The walls in here are pretty thin.

“Nothing, I’m fine,” she tells me with a sniffle.

“I’ve never pegged you as a liar,” I tell her, always straight to the point.

She bursts out sobbing. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t lie to you. I’m upset,” she admits, holding up the wadded-up tissue in her hand as if that’s proof. She must not realize that the way her eyes are swollen red and her face is blotchy is a dead giveaway.

Tara Scott is one of the most dependable, hardworking, loyal workers I’ve ever had. Most days, I don’t know what I’d do without her. She comes in early, leaves late, gives me things I need for meetings before I need them. She’s a godsend.

Honestly, the only complaint that I could have for her is her incessant want to cover every bare inch of the office in holiday cheer at Christmas time. Other than that, she’s perfect.

I sit down in the chair across from her. I've sat in this chair a hundred times to dictate notes or to have her help me strategize something. But right now it's different. I've never seen her upset, and to say it bothers me is an understatement. Tara is way too friendly and kind to be hurting. "Tell me what happened. What's wrong?" I'm already thinking back on the day, wondering who could have been in the office and upset her. The visitors we get are usually the construction workers, but all of my guys know not to mess with Tara. They know she's special to me. I've threatened them enough that it's comical now when they come to the office. If I'm not here, they stand in the entryway with the door open. Tara doesn't understand it. But she doesn't need to. Not yet.

She takes a deep breath and sits back in her chair. I ignore the clock on the wall that just struck six pm and is playing a Christmas tune. I barely hold back the roll of my eyes and encourage her. "C'mon, you can tell me."

"My date cancelled on me," she half whispers, half sobs.

"Date?" I asked, surprised. Probably too surprised by the hurt on her face. I clear my throat. "I didn't know you were dating anyone."

Tara is pretty in a plain way. She wears big thick glasses that cover half her face. Her long brown hair is always up in a bun, and she's curvy. Although I have to admit that I've always noticed how sweet her curves are and usually have to force myself to look away from them.

She's old fashioned in a lot of ways and uses words that make her seem way older than her twenty-three years.

"I'm not dating anyone."

Confused, I tell her, "I don't understand."

"I hired someone to go home with me... to act like my boyfriend. And well, he has the flu. They're looking for a replacement, but with it being the holidays, they just don't know..."

"Tara, slow down. You hired a stranger to act like your boyfriend? What if he's a crazy person? A psycho. Anything.

What were you thinking?" My anxiety just went up a notch, and I don't know if it's because she's talking about dating or the fact she was going to take a stranger home with her.

She shrugs her shoulders, and I give her a pointed look. We know each other well enough that she knows I'm not going to just walk away from this conversation now.

She pulls her shoulders back. "My parents are worried about me and want me to move home—"

"You can't leave," I tell her immediately. I'm not her boss—well, I'm her work boss, but I don't have any say on what she can and can't do, or where she can live. But just her saying they want her to move causes me to panic. I've tried to hide my feelings from her, but now I'm thinking I did the wrong thing.

"I'm not. But they won't let up. They are so worried about me. You've met my parents. You know how wonderful they are, but they're worried, and I hate what I'm doing to them. I was selfish moving so far away, but I never thought they would be this stressed out about it. And I know they're right. I'm here. Three hours away from home. I have no friends, no one to call if I'm sick or need something. Maybe they're right. I just need to admit I lied to them..."

I get lost in her rambling. I know that Tara is different than most women, but I thought she was happy here. I thought we were friends.

She's sobbing again, and because I can't take it anymore, I stand up and circle the desk, sitting on the edge of it and putting my hand on her shoulder. "First of all, you're not here alone. I'm your friend, and if you're sick or ever need something, you call me," I tell her gruffly. I've never cared before about being soft or dealing with emotion, but right now, I wish I was better at it.

"Second of all, what exactly did you tell your parents about your boyfriend?"

"We're friends?" she asks me with surprise.

I've obviously done too good hiding my feelings from her. She's way too young for me and quite frankly not the type of girl that would normally draw my interest. But there's something about her. I've started coming back to the office to make sure she gets to her car safely, I've even followed her home a few times when it was after dark. She's brought out a protective instinct about me, and I sort of don't know what to do with it. "Yes, we're friends. I mean. I know I'm your boss, but I'd still call you my friend. So that means if you need something, you call me." I wait for the words to sink in before I ask her again. "So what do your parents know about your boyfriend?"

"Nothing. I told them we'd been dating a few months, but I wanted to wait to tell them all about him until after they'd met him." She shrugs her shoulders. "It bought me time since I wasn't sure who the dating agency would find for me."

She pulls out her phone and opens her internet app. "Maybe there's another dating service I can call."

I barely stop myself from ripping the phone from her hands. Calmly, I take the phone from her and set it upside down on the desk. "I'll do it," I tell her.

She recoils from me like I'm a poisonous snake. "Holy mackerel. What?" she asks.

I can't help but smirk at her reaction. In the beginning, I always thought she was joking when she would throw out old fashioned slang. I thought she was trying to be funny. But I've discovered that's just the way she is. She doesn't cuss. And she always says off the wall things, but I've come to love that about her. However, her reaction tells me everything I need to know about how she feels about me. I thought for sure I had sensed she was interested in me too. Maybe I was way off. *She's just not into you, Baker. Damn!* "I'll go with you. I don't like the idea of you taking some stranger."

She jumps up from her seat and starts pacing the room. "You can't go with me. You're my boss. I could never ask you to do this."

Still leaning on her desk, I cross my arms and legs calmly. “You’re not asking me. I’m going. Plus, you know me, it’s not like I had plans for Christmas.”

“You hate Christmas!” she explodes.

“I don’t hate Christmas. I just never celebrated it growing up, that’s all,” I tell her. Tara doesn’t know a lot about my childhood. I don’t really talk about it.

She just stands there and stares at me, still looking at me as if I have two heads or something. “What? If you don’t think I’m the type of guy you want – I mean as your fake boyfriend—then I understand.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not that. No one is going to believe you”—she waves her hand toward me—“are going to be interested in me.” And then points at herself.

I could tell her that she’s lovely and has the biggest heart of anyone I know. That to me, she’s beautiful, and I’d be lucky to have her on my arm. But I don’t say any of that. I stand up to my full height, grab her by the shoulders, and look down in her open-mouthed, surprised face. “So when do we leave?”

Chapter 2

Tara

There's no way I can take my boss home with me. Baker doesn't have a clue that I've been pining over him since the first day I met him when I came in for an interview. He's the only reason I stayed here in the first place. I was about to give up and leave when I interviewed for this job, and afterwards, I knew I'd stay if he offered it to me. I still am not sure exactly why he hired me. I stammered and stumbled through the whole interview.

I have a business degree, and I'm very good at being organized and figuring things out. But I had no experience. None. This is my first job since I graduated college, and I'm really surprised he hired me. The only thing I figured at the time was he was desperate. But I didn't care. I've made it my mission to be the absolute best assistant I could be. I knew nothing about construction, building plans, building licenses, nothing. But I've worked hard to learn. Now I can truly say I've been an asset to Baker and his Miller Construction company.

If only I could get over my silly infatuation with him, I could see me staying in this job indefinitely. I just don't know how I'll handle him ever actually dating someone or bringing a girlfriend to the office.

In the beginning it was a simple attraction. Now it's way beyond that. Now I've gotten to know him, and I've fallen even harder for him. He's truly a great guy. A fair boss, treats everyone in a respectable manner, worries about me, and is always offering to drive me in the snow or follow me home.

He makes it impossible to not like him. There's just no way I can spend three to four days—and nights—with him. No way!

"You can't go with me. I'm not putting you through that," I tell him as I shuffle back to my desk, hoping this conversation is over.

"So you're going to leave me here? To celebrate Christmas alone?" he deadpans.

"You're going to be alone on Christmas?" I ask him, about to start crying again. I may not know a lot about his home life, but I do know that he has no immediate family. I do remember him hoping his foster brother would make it home in time for Christmas. I can't even imagine not having a family. That's one thing I've never had to experience. I have a large one, and we spend every holiday together. Just the idea of him spending Christmas alone makes me want to hug him right here and now.

"I'm always alone. Who did you think I would spend Christmas with? My foster brother doesn't know if he'll be home in time for Christmas."

I shrug my shoulders and feel my face heat. "A girlfriend, maybe? I don't know." I get all panicky feeling when I think of him dating someone. I've never seen him go out with anyone, but I only see him at the office. There has to be someone. I mean, he's the total package. Well, he is if you can get past the bah humbug attitude at Christmas.

His lips turn up a little on the sides. "Nope. No girlfriend. I was planning a TV dinner and looking to see if I could find some old Andy Griffith reruns."

"Andy Griffith? I love Andy Griffith," I tell him.

"See, already we have things in common. It won't be so hard to convince anyone we're together. So when are we leaving?" he asks me again.

I hold my hands up in front of him and almost put them on his chest. I stop suddenly and let them fall. "Wait! So you understand, right? You will have to act like my boyfriend. You'd, uh, have to act like you like me," I say hesitantly.

“I can do that,” he says, looking into my eyes. I’m looking for hesitancy or a little doubt, but I don’t see any. For a second, I think I see a flare of interest, but that disappears quickly. “What about you? Can you act like you like me?”

My mouth drops open. Can I act like I like him? I have no worries on whether I can act like I like him. My family even knows how much I like him. When they came to visit me right after I got my job, they came to the office, and I introduced them to Baker. Right away, my mom knew I had a thing for him. There was no convincing her otherwise. So acting like I like him is not going to be a problem. My problem is that I’m going to look like a fool because I’m sure it’s obvious to anyone that pays attention that I’m already half in love with him. “Yes,” I stutter to him.

“Good. It’s settled.” He puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. Like a moron, I look over at his hand, and he drops it quickly, making me wish I’d never even brought attention to it. I like having his hand on me. “So when do we leave?”

I shake my head, still not believing that this is truly happening. “Tomorrow. I was going to leave after work. And then I was coming back the day after Christmas,” I tell him, thinking he’ll rethink it after hearing how many days and back out.

“Sounds good. I’ll be ready.”

He walks into his office and closes the door, leaving me to my thoughts. I still can’t believe what just happened. Did my boss really just offer to be my boyfriend? Well, fake boyfriend. *Don’t let yourself forget this is fake, Tara*, I tell myself.

Chapter 3

Baker

“**Y**ou can still back out. I promise I won’t hold it against you,” Tara tells me.

All day she’s tried to convince me that I don’t have to go. But I’m going. The only thing that would stop me at this point is if she point blank told me she doesn’t want me to go.

I stop midway from carrying her bags to my truck. “Do you not want me to go?” I ask her, almost nervously. If she says no, I’ll carry her bags back to her little car. I may follow her to her parents’ house to make sure she arrives safely, but I won’t come in if that’s what she wants.

She’s twisting her hands in front of her, and she looks everywhere but at me. “It’s just—”

But I stop her. “Look at me,” I tell her.

Her big blue eyes look up at me. For once, she doesn’t have her wide-rimmed glasses on, and I can see how long her lashes are. “Now, tell me. Do you not want me to come with you?”

She doesn’t hesitate then. “I want you to come with me, but—”

She continues to ramble on about how she feels like she’s putting me in a weird spot, but I don’t stick around to listen. I start walking over to my truck to secure the suitcases in the back. She’s following behind me, and finally I turn toward her. “Tara, listen, I’m going with you. I know it’s weird, I’m your boss and all, but I want to do this for you.” I take a step

toward her, and her eyes get even bigger. Her breathing is coming out in little pants, her nostrils are flared, and she's biting her lip. Because I can't resist, I put my hand around the base of her neck and run my thumb over her pulse. It's beating rapidly, and I barely refrain from holding my smile in.

I worried all night whether I was doing the right thing or not. I don't want to lose Tara as an employee, but I'm also tired of pretending I don't have feelings for her. I didn't want to make things weird if I liked her and she doesn't feel the same way, but the way her pulse is racing just standing next to me tells me that I may have a chance. And I'm going to take it. "There's no buts. You want me to go, I want to go. I like spending time with you, and trust me when I tell you, I don't do things unless I want to. You know that about me."

She's staring up at me, speechless. This is the first time I've ever known her to be speechless. I tilt my head to the side and continue running my thumb over her neck. "You okay, sweetie?"

She takes a deep breath, and I don't think she realizes it, but she leans into me. I put my other hand under her chin and pull her up to look at me. "Talk to me."

She closes her eyes briefly before opening them. "Thank you for doing this for me."

She still doesn't realize it, but I'm doing this for us. I feel good about it and know this is going to be a turning point in our relationship. I just hope I'm making the right decision.

"You're welcome." I reluctantly let her go and walk around to the passenger side and open the door for her. "Now, let's get a move on."

After she's in, I walk around to my side. "Okay, where to?"

"Head toward the interstate and I'll bring the directions for Juniper Junction up on my phone."

We drive for a while as I listen to the directions before I ask her, "So what do I need to know?"

I chance a look at her, and she looks confused by the question. “Ya know, to make this believable I’m going to have to know things about you and your family.”

She nods her head, “Right. Well, I have a younger brother. Matt, he’s seventeen. My mom is Janet and my dad’s name is Darren. They both work at the university, Mom in the English department and Dad in the math department. They are complete opposites, but it obviously works for them.”

“Okay, so evidently they know how we met, but what have you told them about us?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing. I told them I wanted you to be a surprise.”

I start to think on that and realize that I didn’t think this all the way through beforehand. “So what will they think about you dating your boss and me being so much older than you?”

“You’re only twelve years older than me. Do you think that’s too much of an age difference?”

It makes me wonder if she’s now worried about what her parents are going to think or if she’s just now considering how much older I am. “I don’t think so. Plus, you act a lot older than most women your age. But what about the boss thing?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I don’t think they’ll care. My parents are pretty good parents. All they’re going to care about is if you make me happy or not.”

“Good. So all I have to do is prove to them I can make you happy,” I tell her as I hold the steering wheel a little tighter. I’m a gruff bastard, I’m her boss and older than her, and all I have to do is prove to Mr. Scott that I’m not taking advantage of his daughter and I can make her happy. No problem.

Tara

Pulling into the driveway of my parents’ house brings back so many memories. Even though it’s starting to get dark outside, I

can still see all the decorations. The lights are strung, lighting up the whole exterior. There's fresh snow all across the yard and trimming the house. I can see the nine-foot Christmas tree in the big bay windows with more lights than I remember.

But the minute I see my mom and dad come out the front door, I realize my mistake.

My mom races toward the driver's side. Not to me, not to her daughter—no, she races to Baker. “I knew it. I knew it. Tara was in love with you from the minute she came for that interview, and I knew it wouldn't be long before you felt it too.” She looks over at my dad. “See, Darren, I should have bet you money. I was right.”

I could argue or make a scene and tell Baker that my mom doesn't know what she's talking about, but I know that will only make it worse. Mortified, I sit in my seat with my head in my hands, unable to move. Did my mom really just tell my boss that I've been in love with him since day one?

My car door opens, and I hear my mom and dad grabbing bags out of the back of the truck.

“Hey, there,” Baker says in my ear. His hand cups my knee, and I know that I'm going to have to look at him. When I raise my head and look into his eyes, I can see the happy smirk on his face.

“It's not what you think,” I tell him.

His forehead creases. “So you don't like me?”

“No! I mean, yes, ugh, you know what I mean,” I tell him, rolling my eyes.

“C'mon, Tara! Bring Baker inside out of the cold,” my mom hollers over her shoulder.

I still haven't budged.

His finger is running circles around my knee, and I can't seem to concentrate on anything but that.

“But that's the thing, Tara, I don't know what you mean.”

“Oh God, okay, so when I came for the interview, I may have told my mom how handsome you were.”

He laughs then, a hearty laugh that ruffles my hair as he breathes out. “So you think I’m good looking. Your mom made it sound like a whole lot more than that.”

Why does he not sound upset? I look up at him, and he’s staring back at me with a smile on his lips. “I may have been just a tad bit smitten with you,” I tell him. I let out a nervous giggle and then push my way out of the truck. “So are you backing out now?” I ask him.

“Hell no!” he answers emphatically. “It’s just gettin’ good!”

He takes a few steps, and when he looks back, I have to remember to close my mouth, which is hanging open. He holds his hand out to me. “C’mon, your mom’s waiting for us.” When I reach for his hand, he pulls me under his arm as we walk slowly up the steps. “Don’t forget we’re supposed to act like we like each other,” he tells me, nuzzling his face into my neck. When his lips graze across the lobe of my ear, I almost trip over my own feet.

“I uh,” I stammer.

He just smiles as he pulls away from me. “Don’t worry. We got this.”

And then his lips touch mine. It’s the briefest of kisses, making me wonder if I imagined it. But my lips are warm and tingly as I touch them with my finger. Yep. My boss just kissed me... and I liked it.

Chapter 4

Baker

“So I’m putting you and Baker in your old room. Your dad’s already carried your bags up,” Tara’s mom tells us after dinner.

I can see the minute that Tara grasps what her mother’s saying. “No!” she almost screams. “I mean no. I can bunk in Matt’s room. Baker can have my room.”

“Nonsense, Tara. What’s wrong with you tonight? You’ve barely eaten your dinner. You’ve been quiet. Even more quiet than normal,” her mom says.

“Mrs. Scott, thank you so much for the hospitality. Really. Pot roast is one of my favorite meals, and yours was so good. And thank you so much for letting me stay in your home,” I tell her to help Tara out. She seems like she’s about to hyperventilate or something.

I reach under the table and run my hand across her leg to soothe her, but her whole body tenses next to me.

“Mrs. Scott? You can call me Janet. Or who knows, maybe one day soon you’ll be calling me Mom,” she says with a big smile. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to get dessert.”

As soon as her mom walks out of the room, Tara bangs her head into her hand then looks up at me. “I’m going to fix this. I promise. I know we can’t sleep in the same bed. I can’t believe she’s already talking marriage.” She starts to whisper as her dad walks in with a tray of coffee and her mom walks in with dessert. “I’ll fix this.”

I squeeze her hand and bring it over to my thigh. I run circles with my thumb across her soft skin.

“So, Baker, how’s business?” Mr. Scott asks me.

“Good. We’re staying busy. We’ve got quite a few new clients, and I’ve had to hire a few crews to keep up,” I tell him. Mr. Scott is an easygoing man, and I think Tara was right. Her dad doesn’t care that I’m her boss or how old I am. He just wants her to be happy.

“And what about my pumpkin? She a big help in the office?” he asks with a twinkle in his eye.

I put my arm around Tara. “She has proven herself to be irreplaceable. I don’t know how I could make it without her,” I tell him honestly. It’s like second nature for me to pull Tara in and kiss her forehead. I want to kiss her lips again, but I’m afraid she’d combust right in her seat if I tried it. She looks like she’s about to blow a gasket.

“Dad” she says. “Mom said you put us in my old room. I can stay with Matt on the twin bed in his room, and Baker can have my room. We don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable.”

Matt, who’s been in and out of the room on his phone most of the night, finally looks up. “Except me. I’ll be uncomfortable if I have to share a room with my sister.”

“Nonsense, pumpkin. I thought the same thing too, but your mom convinced me that we’re hip,” Mr. Scott says, rolling his eyes. “Whatever that means. You and Baker take your room.”

Tara starts to argue, but I stop her by squeezing onto her hand. “Thank you, Mr. Scott.” I quickly change the subject. “Janet, is that apple pie? My favorite!”

Tara

What in the world is going on right now? Am I in some kind of strange universe or what? I'm sitting at my parents' dinner table, talking about Baker and me sleeping in the same room together over apple pie. Is this for real?

I've done all I could to try and sway their decision, but it seems like Baker was trying to stop me. What's he thinking? We can't sleep in the same room together, much less the same bed.

I look at him over my fork, and he's smiling at my parents. He has them talking about their work, and from the looks of it, he's even won over my little brother by the way he's put his phone down for the last five minutes. It has to be some kind of record.

Finally, when everyone's had their fill, I try to get myself a breather. I need a little space to think about things and to bring myself back down to reality. *This is fake, Tara. Fake!* "Mom, I'll take care of cleanup."

"Nonsense. I know you and Baker have to be tired after working all day and then driving almost three hours home. It's nice your boss let you leave early so you could get here in time for dinner." She cackles at her joke and then pushes me toward Baker, who catches me in his arms.

"Thanks again, Mrs.—" And then with a stern look from my mom, he finishes with, "Janet. Everything was so good."

"Yeah, thanks, Mom! It was perfect." I go to hug her and my dad and then reach for Baker's outstretched hand.

We walk up the steps side by side, and I'm trying not to freak out. "This is my room," I tell him and push the door open and walk inside. The room is just as I remember it. It's got the big king-sized bed in the middle, but of course Mom has added some extra touches. She's added a tree by the window, which is Christmas tree number eight so far. My mom definitely goes overboard for the holidays.

"So this is us," he says, looking at the bed.

I point to the chair in the corner. "I'll sleep there."

Dare I say he looks disappointed. "I'll sleep in the chair."

I put my hands on my hips. “Cool your jets. There’s no way you’re sleeping in that little chair. It makes more sense for me to do it.”

He walks over to the bed and sits down. “Actually, it makes more sense for the two of us to sleep on the bed. It’s a big bed.”

I know I’m staring at him with my mouth hanging open. Did he just suggest we sleep in the same bed together?

I take a step toward him and then another. “I didn’t plan this, Baker. I had no idea they would have put us in a room together.”

He stands up and cups my face. “I know that. But I’m glad it’s me you brought with you instead of someone else. Someone that may try to take advantage of the situation.”

I pull my shoulders back. “Right.” Of course he’s right. He’s my boss, and this is a fake date. He’s my fake boyfriend. And there’s no way he’s going to take advantage of the situation. Not that he’d want to.

“I’m going to shower, okay?” he asks.

I nod my head and walk over to the Christmas tree like I’m admiring some ornaments. I hear him shut the bathroom door, and soon after, the shower turns on. I turn to the closed door, and all I can think about is that my boss is on the other side of that door, and he’s naked. I fall back onto my bed and try to figure out how I’m going to sleep in the same bed with the man I’ve had a crush on for months and not throw myself at him. *You’re in over your head on this one, Tara.*

Chapter 5

Baker

An hour later, I'm lying in the big bed hard as a rock. Tara's lying next to me, and her scent is wrapped all around me. I try to keep my voice calm so she doesn't hear the arousal in it. "Are you glad to be home?"

She's been tense since she came out of the bathroom after her shower. She lay down next to me and hasn't moved a muscle since. "I am. I miss my parents, and it's always good to be home."

"So you've never told me. Why did you leave in the first place?"

She snorts. "Have you met my family?"

"Yeah, and they seem pretty great! They obviously love you very much."

She turns to her side to face me, and I can see her face since the Christmas tree is still lit up in the corner. It's funny to think that I've never had a Christmas tree before, so I've never really thought about it. But right now, with the pretty colors lighting up the room and Tara's face, well, it does almost seem magical.

"I don't really fit in with my family. Don't get me wrong. They're great. I'm just different."

I lift up on my elbow and stare down into her face. The vulnerability I see surprises me a little. "What do you mean?"

She shakes her head. "Please don't make me say it."

"I'm sorry, but I don't get it."

She blows out a breath. “My mom was the beauty queen in high school and college. She’s an award-winning author. My dad was quarterback and has always been cool and popular. They have more friends than I could ever imagine having. My brother is the quarterback and super gifted in everything he does. I’m just... me.”

I shake my head. “You’re smart. Way smarter than me in a lot of ways. You’re beautiful.”

“I am not,” she argues.

“You are too. You have the biggest heart of anyone I know. You may not have a lot of friends, but the ones you do have seem to think you’re something special.”

She opens her mouth and closes it. Finally she mumbles, “Thank you.”

I brush a stray hair off her face. “You’re welcome.”

“Thank you for coming with me, Baker. I know this is awkward for you...”

“It’s not,” I assure her. How do I tell her that even though I’ve never been with a family for Christmas that I don’t feel awkward at all? I just feel happy. Happy to be with her. “So what do we have planned for tomorrow?”

“Uh, let’s see. It’s Christmas Eve... so that will be ice skating, shopping, and then ugly Christmas sweater party.”

“Ugly Christmas sweater party... I’ll have to sit that one out. I forgot my ugly Christmas sweater,” I tell her.

She laughs. “You wish it was that easy. I made you one, so you’re good to go.”

“Haha! I see how it is.” I roll onto my back because lying next to her, looking at her is just too tempting.

She rolls to her back too. “Goodnight, Baker.”

“Goodnight, sweetie.”

I lie there for a long time and listen to her next to me. She’s way over on her side, and I don’t dare turn toward her

because I know I'll reach for her. No matter how bad I want her, I won't take advantage of the situation.

Tara

Buzz. Buzz.

A sound startles me awake, but I don't dare move. I'm cocooned in heat with arms and legs wrapped around me. I freeze against Baker. He's pressed against my back, but I can't blame him because I'm completely on his side of the bed.

The noise starts again, and Baker's gruff voice is right next to my ear. "That's my phone."

"Do you want to get it?" I ask him.

His hand tightens on my breast, and he sighs heavily. "No, there would have to be a bomb to get me to move right now."

"Baker..." I start nervously. I know I should move. We reached for each other in the middle of the night obviously and just stayed to share each other's heat. We should move. *Why isn't he moving?*

"I'm sorry, Tara. I said I could handle sleeping in the bed next to you, but obviously I should have told my body that." He shifts his hips, and I feel his hard manhood pressed against my buttocks. He's hard... for me.

"Uh..." I stammer, unsure what to say. He starts to move away from me, but I know that even though I don't know what to say, I do know that I don't want him to move away. "No. Stay."

He groans and rests his forehead on the top of my head. "You don't know what you're asking."

I move my lower body just an inch, wanting him to be close to me again, and he groans. "Tara, I'm not playing. I'm trying to do right by you, and feeling your curvy body in my arms, fuck in my hands"—he squeezes my breasts—"well, I'm about to put my good intentions aside."

I almost tell him that's okay with me when his phone goes off again.

"Ugh, I'm going to have to get it."

Deflated, I tell him, "Okay." I don't want him to move either.

"Unless you want to grab it and read the text for me," he says against my ear.

"You want me to read it? What if it's a girlfriend or something?"

His lips touch the shell of my ear. "I told you I don't have a girlfriend." He laughs a little. "Well, now I do. But I don't think you're texting me." He kisses my ear. "You can read my phone. I don't hide anything from you."

I reach for the phone, but Baker holds on to me and moves with me as I go across the bed to reach the phone. I lie back down, and he moves his head so he can read it over my shoulder. I try to calm my breath and not reveal how I'm panicking right now. I'm in bed with Baker, and I'm sort of freaking out about it. "It's from my brother," he says.

And I know I've heard about his foster brother Dawson. He's the only family that Baker has, and he's been serving in the army since the day he turned eighteen.

He starts to read the text.

Bro, I'm in Mistletoe. I got in yesterday.

The next text says, *I had a visitor show up this morning. Cassie is here.*

Text me.

"Yes!" Baker says over my shoulder excitedly.

"What is it?" I ask, turning in his arms.

"Cassie is someone that Dawson's been talking to for a while. He wasn't going to see her when he got out, but something must have happened."

His arms are still around me, and I'm holding the phone between us. "Do you want to reply?"

"Yeah. Uh, good to hear. Don't mess it up. I'm in Juniper Junction with Tara. I'll see you after Christmas. Love you, bro. Merry Christmas."

I type it into the phone and hit send.

Almost as soon as I do, there's a text back and I read it to Baker. "It's about fuckin' time. Merry Christmas Bro! love you too."

I look at the phone and read the words again. "What does he mean it's about freakin' time?" I ask him with my face heated. I barely ever cuss, but I have to know the answer to this.

"It means it's about time that I made a move on you."

"Wait. What?" I ask him, wanting him to clarify.

But as soon as he starts to speak, there's a knock on the door. "C'mon, you lovebirds. Breakfast is ready, and Mom's freaking out that we're going to be late to skate."

"Coming!" I holler to my little brother through the door.

Baker jumps from the bed and leans over and kisses me. "Saved by the knock. I'll be quick," he tells me as he goes into the bathroom, leaving me to figure out if what he said was true or not. Could this be real?

Chapter 6

Baker

All morning, I work on getting my mind right. Back home, I had convinced myself that I needed to take this slow, but now, having Tara by my side every minute is wreaking havoc on all of my good intentions.

“How you holding up?” she asks me as another ice skater flies by.

I’m lacing up my skates, but I stop to reach out to her and tug her into my lap. “I’m good. You weren’t lying when you said Juniper Junction is Christmassy.”

She laughs. “I told you so. None of my family is watching, ya’ know.” She tries to take her weight off of me. “Plus, I’m too big to be in your lap.” Her arms are around my neck, and I want to stand up and take her out of here with me. How have I resisted her this long? At the office, she’s uptight and serious. Seeing her smiling and with her family she’s so laid back.

I hold her to me, even when she struggles to get up. “You’re not, though. You’re perfect. And you never know. One of them could be watching.” Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are bright and twinkling. “You’re different here.”

She merely stares at me, glancing between my eyes and my lips. “You’re more relaxed. Back at the office... do I make you nervous?”

She giggles but tightens her arms around me. “Yes. I wanted to do a good job for you.”

“You do a great job. But I don’t want you nervous around me. I like you like this... relaxed... happy.”

“I’m happy with you... I mean, my job.”

I cup her chin to look up at me. “I’m happy with you too. That’s why I want to kiss you.”

“You want to kiss me?” she asks as I move in closer. Her breath is hot on my cheek.

“Yes.”

Her eyes are trained on mine. There’s excitement, longing, and maybe even a little bit of worry there. “But nobody’s watching us.”

“I don’t care,” I tell her and reach in, fully intending to have a sweet and simple kiss like the one I gave her last night. But as soon as our lips touch, I lose all sense of what’s right and wrong. Her sweet vanilla cinnamon scent is surrounding us, I can feel all her sweet curves pressed into me, and it pushes me further, wanting her more. As far as I’m concerned, it’s just the two of us here, sharing our first real kiss, and it’s more than I ever could have imagined. When she opens to me, I plunge my tongue into her mouth, tasting her.

A tiny moan brings me back from the brink. I pull back, realizing the sound came from her. Her satisfied whimper brings me to my senses. I can’t make love to her right here. Not at a busy ice skating rink and with families – her family – all around us.

I rest my forehead against hers and clench my eyes shut tight. I try to think of anything, but all I can focus on is her in my lap kissing me.

“Honey, this may be a little too much for you right now. I don’t want to embarrass you, but you’re going to have to get off my lap.”

She struggles to get up, and her bottom moving across my lap makes my situation even worse. When I groan painfully, she says, “See, I told you I was too big.”

I hold on to her hand, not wanting her to walk away.

“You’re not. Don’t say that again.”

She shrugs her shoulders defiantly and stares down at me. “Are you going to skate or what?”

I pull her down so that I have to whisper into her ear. “Yeah, I’m going to come skate. But first I need to calm down a little, or everyone here is going to know just how much I want you right now.”

She pulls her head back, and her eyes flicker to my lap, up to my eyes and then back to my lap again. As if my cock has a mind of its own, I swear it jerks in my jeans when she’s looking at it.

“Oh wowzers!” she says, her hands over her mouth. “Is that, uh, is that...”

“Yeah, honey. It’s because of you... so I’m going to need a minute.” I would laugh at her expression if I wasn’t trying to count backwards from a hundred.

She sits down next to me, and we sit there awkwardly for who knows how long. Her parents wave to us, wanting us to join them, and I swear it’s like I’m a teenaged boy that can’t handle his own hard-on. Tara puts her hand on my knee. “Baker.”

It’s innocent enough from the outside. But not to me. Her touch is like an electric rod prodding me, and when I look at her lust-glittered eyes I know that I can’t take much more. Through gritted teeth, I tell her, “Tara, go out with your parents. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Her eyes burn with desire. “I don’t want to just leave you. Can I do something?”

Like I’ve just had a punch in the gut, I bend forward. “Fuck, Tara,” I hiss. “If we were anywhere else, I’d take you up on that.”

She gapes at me, realizing what she said and how it sounded. Her lips part, and I get a mental image of her puffy pink stained lips wrapped around my cock. “Go. I’ll be out in a minute.”

She turns to go but stops. “If we were anywhere else I’d, ya know, help you.” And with a big smile, she twirls around and skates off toward her parents and brother.

And like a glutton for punishment, I watch her ass sway the whole way.

Tara

After skating, lunch, and some shopping, I’m lying on my bed exhausted. My dad has Baker cornered in the garage helping him with one of the big Christmas decorations that he couldn’t get to work. I left him there with an assurance to my dad that I’m sure Baker could fix it.

As I walked away, I saw the look Baker gave me. I thought it would be funny to subject him to some time with my dad, but he didn’t seem to mind.

So I came back to my room, hoping to bring myself back to reality. *This is fake*, I keep telling myself. *He’s flirting with me, but it doesn’t mean anything.*

I pull out the sweaters that I made for Baker and me. If we make it through Christmas, I may ask him what a girl’s got to do to win his affection. But looking down at the itchy, thick material in my hands, I’m pretty sure this is not the way to go about it.

Chapter 7

Baker

She thought I'd say no. I saw it in the surprised look she gave me. But I didn't. I couldn't. I don't think I could tell her no on anything at this point. She's got me hook, line, and sinker.

"Nice shirt!" Matt says and starts to laugh.

I look down at the tinsel covered green sweater. It has ornaments sewn on the tinsel and a big star attached to the end of my sleeve. I'm still not sure what I'm supposed to be, but Tara was excited for me to wear it, so I have it on.

"Where's yours at?" I ask Matt.

"I'm going to my girlfriend's tonight. Too bad I'm going to miss out on this. It looks like it's going to be a swell ol' time."

He stresses the word swell as Tara comes in with a matching sweater the same as mine. "Get out of here, hooligan, before I tell Mom and Dad you should have to spend time with family."

"Hooligan." He laughs. "I swear sometimes I wonder what century you're from. I'm out." He hugs his sister and fist bumps me on the way out the door.

"Do you like the sweater?" Tara asks me.

This is the first time we've been alone since we got back from skating and shopping, and I don't want to talk about the sweater. I want to talk about us.

"You made it. I love it," I tell her truthfully. "So..."

“But you haven’t seen the full effect yet. Watch...” She holds her hands together over her head. The black leggings she has on look like a tree trunk, and her green sweater flares out at the bottom and tapers up. The garland and ornaments make what look like a Christmas tree and she’s holding the star at the top, like it’s a tree topper. She made us matching Christmas tree sweaters.

“Wait. Stay right there.” I tell her, pulling my phone out of my pocket. I take a few shots of her and when her mom walks in, she offers to take a few of the both of us together as she gushes over our sweaters.

I swear I can’t wipe the smile off my face. If my brother Dawson could see me now, he’d never believe it. We were never the Christmas type. I take one of the images and shoot it to him as a message. I feel bad that I wasn’t there when he got home; it’s been months since I’d seen him last. It makes me feel a little at ease that Cassie is there with him. Well, if he didn’t run her off, anyway.

We walk two blocks down to the aunt’s house. I guess they alternate every year, and this year is Aunt Maggie’s turn. With a warning to stay away from the eggnog—“It’s laced with one hundred proof liquor” Janet warns me with a whisper—they leave Tara and me to walk around and mingle. Tara introduces me the first time as her boss, so I take over introductions after that. “Hi, I’m Baker, Tara’s boyfriend.”

It seems to get a squeal of delight from all the women of her family. We move around the room, and Tara stops suddenly when we are standing in front of a young woman that is around the same age as Tara. I can feel Tara’s body tense next to me. I look around the room, and from the glint in the eye of the woman standing in front of me she is the cause of the sudden frigid air around us.

“Tara. Looks like you’ll win the ugly sweater contest this year. Definitely the ugliest.”

“Hey!” I start, but Tara puts a hand to my chest.

“Baker, this is my cousin Hilda. Hilda, this is my b...”

“Boyfriend,” I say, interrupting her, pulling her close into my side and kissing her on the forehead. I don’t even look at Hilda because I can already tell I don’t like her.

Hilda looks between the two of us and grins mischievously. “Right! I don’t believe it.”

Tara seems to deflate on the spot. And it gets even worse when Hilda puts her hand on my chest. I’ve never wanted to harm a woman in my life, but right now I’d like to.

“So, Baker, when you get tired of playing games with her, how about you call me up?” She pats me on the chest and walks away.

Stunned, I stand there like a lump on a log. I’ve never dealt with anyone so arrogant and just a plain asshole. At least not a woman. “Tara—” I turn to her, but I realize it’s too late.

Tara’s face is white. So white she looks like she may pass out. “Are you okay?” I reach for her, but she holds her hands up, evading my hold. “I just need a minute.”

She tries to smile at me, but it’s right in the middle of a sob that she takes off running from the room.

I look around the room, wondering what I should do. Tara obviously doesn’t want to talk to me right now, but I can’t just leave her upset like that. I look to see if anyone else noticed it when a small man walks toward me. “Looks like my Hilda struck again.”

“Your Hilda? You’re married to that woman?”

He looks sad about it when he answers me. “Yep, I am.”

“Wow!” is all I say. Poor guy. She’s definitely not nice, and she seems to flirt with men even if she’s married.

“She’s always had it out for Tara. It got worse when I finally agreed to go on a date with her.”

Confused, I look at him in question. “Why’s that?”

He shakes his head and smiles. “Sorry. Let me introduce myself. I’m Cameron. I dated Tara in high school and up until

she left for college. I would have stayed with her too, but she broke it off before she went.”

“So you married her cousin?”

“Yeah. Trust me, I should have waited for Tara and begged her to take me back,” he says, his voice full of regret.

My hands clench at my sides. I look around at all the people laughing and having a good time. Tara and I should be doing that. Not letting Hilda and now Cameron ruin this for us.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Cameron,” I tell him, even though it’s a lie. I start to walk away and stop, feeling like I need to say more. “She’s mine. Tara’s mine now,” I tell him, wanting him to know without a doubt he doesn’t have a chance of getting her back.

I go in search of Tara all around the upstairs and then back to the main floor. Against Janet’s advice, I grab a glass of eggnog and down it in one swig. Christmas music is blasting in the backyard, so I go to the front. And there is where I find Tara. She’s sitting on the porch, her knees are pulled up to her chest, and she’s so deep in thought she doesn’t even lift her head up until I sit down next to her on the stoop.

“What are you doing out here by yourself?” I ask her.

She lifts her red-rimmed eyes to me. “Can I talk to you?”

“Yes.”

“Hilda is married,” she starts.

“I don’t care...” I try to butt in, but she holds her hand up to stop me.

I reach for her, but she shakes her head. “No. I can’t do this touching you. Let me just get this out. Okay?”

I nod my head because I can feel this is important, and I don’t want to mess it up for her. But the fact she won’t let me touch her doesn’t sound like this is going to go in my favor.

“I haven’t been very honest with you, and I hate that, because I’m usually a very honest person.”

She looks at me, but I just stare back at her and wait patiently.

“I like you, Baker Miller. I liked you the second I met you. You are the reason I stayed in town. After getting to know you, I well, let’s just say, I’m smitten.” She looks away and seems to take a deep breath, then pulls her shoulders back and looks at me again. “I know that’s maybe not what you want to hear. And I know that you’re probably used to women like Hilda or someone else, but I’m me. And well, I like me. But I can’t play this game anymore. I thought it would be harmless, but I can feel myself falling apart right now. It’s like I had a taste of what it could be like, and I know I’m not going to have that. I think it’s best if we stopped this charade we have going on.”

When she finally stops talking, I can tell she’s on the verge of tears. Because I can’t hold it back any longer, I reach for her and pick her up, pulling her to my lap. “You’re right, Tara. I don’t want to do this charade anymore either.”

She instantly starts to struggle and move from my lap, but I hold on tight, my arms around her waist. “I don’t want a charade because I want the real thing. I want it with you. Why do you think I did this? Insisted that I come with you and got so upset when I heard you had called for a male escort? It’s because I like you, Tara. A lot!”

She sobs. “You’re smitten with me?”

My voice is deep and clear next to her ear. “Totally smitten.”

Chapter 8

Tara

“**W**here are we going?” he asks me as I pull him down the sidewalk.

I turn with a glint in my eye. “To my house. My parents will be here most of the night.” I wiggle my eyebrows at him, and he surprises me by picking me up, one arm under my back and the other behind my knees. He takes off running to my house as fast as he can.

We laugh the whole way, and I can’t believe this is the same guy that was bah humbugging about Christmas. He’s been such a good sport. Ice skating, caroling, shopping, ugly Christmas sweater party, meeting all my family... he did all of it... for me.

We run up the stairs, and we’re both huffing and puffing as we race into the room. But my laughs stop when he’s standing in front of me, looking at me with desire. “Do you want to take it off or you want me to?” he asks, gesturing to my sweater.

I lean over and take off one of my shoes and then grin at him.

“Cute. But that’s not what I want to see. I want to see you. I felt you in my arms last night; now I want to see you.”

My lower belly rolls, remembering waking up next to him this morning. I could definitely get used to that. I answer him by pulling at the hem of my top and lifting it over my head. Before I lose confidence, I take off my other shoe and pull down my black leggings. When I’m standing in front of him

with only a pair of black panties and my black bra, I look up at him.

“Fuck,” he says as he cups himself in his pants. “You’re breathtaking.”

I shake off his compliment and take a step toward him. “Baker, I want you.”

My whole body is trembling as I realize how true that statement is. I want him any way I can have him.

I pull at his shirt, and he lifts his arms so I can take it off him. As soon as I see bare skin, I run my hands all across his chest as if I’m memorizing the way he looks and feels. His muscles jump as I touch him, and it makes me happy, knowing that he’s reacting to my touch this way.

He just stands there and lets me, but when I reach for the button of his pants, his hands come out to stop me.

I look up at him questioningly. “Let me see you,” he says huskily.

He reaches behind me and unsnaps my bra, pulling it down my shoulders and off my arms. What he does with it then I have no idea because he’s dropped to his knees in front of me and sucks my nipple into his mouth. His hands are everywhere, kneading my other breast, feathering across my stomach, reaching around to cup my butt and bring me closer to him.

When his hands go between my thighs, I close them instantly.

He moves off my breast and starts kissing my stomach, moving further down until he’s peeling my underwear off and parting my swollen lips with his fingers. As soon as his tongue touches my lower belly, my hips jerk at the contact.

“Baker,” I moan, my hands in his hair pulling him toward me.

He says something, but I don’t understand because he’s found my clit with his tongue, and he’s caressing me in ways I’ve never imagined.

He pulls my leg up to rest over his shoulder, and I'm half on the bed, half off, but I don't really care. I don't care about anything right now except him finishing what he started.

"Please don't stop," I beg him.

He shakes his head side to side, and the friction of his lips moving across my pussy has me tightening on his finger that is moving in and out of me.

I can feel the climax coursing through me, pushing me to the edge. But Baker is relentless. He doesn't stop until I'm coming on his face, and even then he's pushing me further until all that's left is tiny tremors shaking my core.

"I'm so delirious. I've imagined that a million times but it's usually on my desk at work," I admit breathlessly.

"We'll have to try that," he tells me as he unzips his pants and pulls them down his legs.

The giant bulge in his shorts has me staring, wondering what I'm going to see underneath. But I don't have to wait long. Baker is in a rush as he tears his shorts off. His manhood is huge and erect. The big bulb on the end looks angry as it drips precum onto the floor.

I jerk my eyes up to his when I realize I've been staring at him, and I blush as I see him looking down at me with hunger. "I want to be inside you. I don't want to wait another minute," he tells me as wraps his hand around his girth and strokes it long and hard.

"You don't have to."

I lie back on the bed and bring my knees to my chest. It's brazen, and I never thought I would ever be comfortable opening myself up this way. But with Baker, I'm not scared. His desire for me is evident, and I'm not going to be bashful with him. I'm laying it on the line. "I'm yours."

I barely get the words out, and he's climbing up my body and positioning himself at my core. His hands go to my hips, and he pulls my body to align with his. He moves into me, inch by inch. I can feel myself stretching to accommodate his large size.

His eyes are on mine the whole time. I couldn't look away if I tried. When he's fully seated inside me, I plant my feet on the bed and start to move. My hips have a mind of their own, and I lift to meet him with every thrust.

It's so much more than two bodies combining as one. The emotion is too much, and I try to tamp it down and live in the moment, but I can't. I know this is more than just sex. I can feel it in his sweet caress, the way he looks at me, the way he's touching me.

That sends quivers through my body, and I'm coming again. This time with him heavy inside me and on top of me, and it's the best feeling I've ever had.

"Yes, oh yes," I say into the room. He grunts then, and I can feel him expand inside me before his thrusts turn erratic and I'm milking him.

Only when we both lie there breathless do I realize what I just did. I slept with my boss. The man that I love... and I want to do it again.

Chapter 9

Baker

It's before dawn on Christmas morning, and even though I'm exhausted, I still can't sleep. The Christmas tree is lit in the corner. The Scotts came home last night, and we went down to visit with them for a while. If her parents knew what we were up to, they didn't say a word. When we finally went back to our room, we lay in the bed, my arms wrapped around her most of the night. The house is silent, and I should be sleeping. But all I can do is stare at Tara. I'm sitting in the chair in the corner, fighting temptation. If I could, I'd take her again right now. Now that I've had her, I know I'm not going to be able to keep my hands off her. I risked so much coming here because I truly can't make it at the office without her. If she'd told me she didn't feel the same way about me, I don't know what I would've done.

But I know I've made the right decision.

These last few days with her have been everything. If someone had told me this time last year that I'd be willingly spending Christmas with a woman and her family, I would have thought they were insane. When I was younger, we never celebrated Christmas, and as I grew older and I found out the only person I could depend on besides myself was my foster brother Dawson, we still didn't celebrate it. We usually, if he was in town, would hang out at a bar and find ways to get through the night without thinking about the love and family we didn't have.

For the first time, I'm able to see it clearly.

Tara is what I've been searching for. She's joy and happiness. She's warm and loving. She's fun and caring. All this time I thought I didn't need Christmas or someone to share it with. But in reality, it's because of her, because of Tara I'm able to enjoy it.

Tara starts to slide her hand across the bed, and as if she's noticing I'm gone, she lifts her head up to search for me. When she spots me sitting in the chair in the corner, she whispers, "What are you so deep in thought about over there?"

"I'm thinking about us."

She smiles, sitting up in the bed. The sheet falls to her waist, and her tight T-shirt shows her perfect breasts with peaked nipples. She holds her hand out to me. "Come back to bed."

I want to go to her, but I need to get something off my chest first.

I drop to my knees next to the bed, and she blinks at me, confused. "I love you, Tara."

Her hand goes to her chest over her heart. Emotion fills her voice. "I love you too, Baker."

I let out a deep breath. Now I just hope she doesn't freak out.

I grab the box I had put on the nightstand earlier and hold it tightly in my hand.

"I don't think you get it. Since the day you first come into the office, I wanted you. I wanted you in my life, in my home, in my bed. Not for a few days at your parents' or as some kind of fake relationship. I want the real thing. I want to go on each day knowing that I have you by my side. I know this may be too much for you, but it's not for me." My heart is racing in my chest, but I know I have to finish this. I have to get it out. I open my hand to show her the small jewelry box. I flip it open and hold it out between us. "I bought this after the second week you started working for me. I knew then that I wanted you to be my wife. Will you marry me, Tara?"

"Oh my God. Baker, yes. Yes," she tells me.

She doesn't even look at the ring. She dives straight for me, pushing me backwards and landing on top of me. I fall backwards and sprawl on the floor with her on top of me. The Christmas tree shakes over top of us, but I don't care right now. All that matters is she said yes.

I roll over on top of her and brush the hair off her face. "You just made me very happy," I tell her, looking into her eyes.

"Me too, Baker. Me too."

Epilogue

Tara

Two Years Later

“That better not be what I think it is, Mr. Miller,” I say to Baker in the haughtiest tone I can manage.

He tries to slide right past me as he comes into the house, but I stop him by moving in front of him. With a hand to chest, I look up into his wide, innocent eyes. “What is that you’re bringing into the house?”

He smiles and kisses me on the forehead. As if that’s going to get him out of trouble. “It’s just a present.”

It’s hard to get mad at him when he’s like this, but Baker has been a gift buying machine since the day BJ, Baker Junior, was born. And now that it’s BJ’s first Christmas, as Baker keeps reminding me, he’s brought in another gift.

“I thought we were done shopping,” I tell him with a tilt to my head.

“We were. I mean we are, but I saw this, and I thought he just had to have it.”

I hold my hand out to him. “Let me see it.”

He looks like he might bolt instead of handing over the present, but finally he hands it over. I open the shopping bag and pull out a miniature glove and baseball bat. “Baker, he just turned one. What is he going to do with this?” I ask him, holding it up in one hand and my other hand on my hip.

He puffs out his chest. “I’m going to teach him to play baseball. You’re never too young to start. If nothing else, we

can roll the ball back and forth for now.”

I just shake my head. Baker has made it his mission to be the very best dad he could be. He didn’t have one, and he’s determined that BJ never misses out on anything—I guess that includes baseball now.

I raise onto my tiptoes. “I love you, Baker. But this is it, okay? We’re going to be hours opening gifts Christmas morning as it is.”

He holds his fingers up. “Scouts honor.”

I purse my lips. “Were you even a scout?”

“Fine. I promise. No more presents. I just, well, I’m excited about Christmas now. I never had that growing up, and I want BJ to enjoy it. That’s all.”

“Don’t worry,” I assure him. “This is going to be your best Christmas ever... I promise.”

“No way,” he says, wrapping his arms around my waist. “Nothing could beat our first Christmas together. Two years ago was my best Christmas ever... by far. Nothing could beat it.”

I put my arms up around his neck. “Oh yeah? What was so good about it?” I ask him. I know why it was my best Christmas, but I still want to hear what he has to say.

“I got my first present that year... and it was definitely the best.”

I think back. “You mean the earphones I got you.”

“No, that wasn’t the first present you gave me.”

I just laugh. “I was there, Baker. Yes, it was.”

His arms tighten around me, and my heart starts to race. He always knows just how to hold me. “No, the first present you gave me was you... when you told me you’d marry me... nothing can beat that.”

“Oh you. Who would have thought you’d turn out to be a romantic?”

“What can I say? You bring it out of me.” And then he bends down and presses his lips to mine. Every kiss with him is better than the last. He still makes my toes curl and my belly do flip-flops.

“I love you, Baker,” I tell him, resting my head against his chest.

“I love you too, sweet girl.”

Epilogue 2

Baker

18 years later

The ballroom has been transformed into something magical. For someone that grew up not celebrating Christmas, I've done a complete 180. Now I am always looking for the Christmas spirit in things, and this year is no different.

I had to get here early to make sure everything went off without a hitch. I sent Tara to the salon and gave her a full day of pampering.

Our kids—well, I guess I should say young adults—Baker Junior and Tessie are in on this and have been running around doing last-minute errands. They should be arriving soon.

I tug at the tie around my neck. It's uncomfortable, and I'd prefer to be wearing my jeans, but tonight is special, so suit and tie it is. "The guests are arriving, sir." I nod my thanks to Trevor, the event planner. He's helped me put this whole night together, and he deserves every penny I pay him.

I pull out my phone to call my wife when I hear my name from across the room. I raise my head, a smile already on my face. Tara does that to me, though. To this day, after 20 years of marriage, she still makes me happy.

As soon as I spot her, my heart starts to race in my chest. "Wow," I hear, and when I realize it didn't come from me, I look over at the man that planned this whole night and can barely contain the jealousy raging inside me.

"Eyes off my wife, Trevor."

“Oh, yes, sir,” he stutters before turning away from the goddess in the red dress.

I practically sprint across the room, and as soon as she’s within arm’s reach, I grab her and hold her close.

My voice is deep, and I’m trying to keep the possessive tone under control. “I was hoping to stay out of jail tonight, baby.”

She looks at me in confusion. “Jail? What are you talking about?”

Her lips are painted red, and she looks beautiful. Too sexy to resist. I kiss her like my life depends on it. I put a hand on each of her ass cheeks and pull her against me. My arousal is pressed into her belly, and I would give anything to have her right now. I’m about to find an empty room when I hear, “Mom! Dad!” being hollered from across the ballroom. Our kids have the absolute worst sense of timing.

I look at Tara regretfully and whisper, “I’m going to steal you away tonight. Find us some privacy.”

She laughs, and we both turn to our kids as I stand behind my wife to hide my hard-on.

My mother-in-law must have arrived with the kids because she’s standing there with a twinkle in her eye. “Sorry to interrupt, but people are waiting to be let in.”

I know I told Trevor to let them in, but it’s probably good he didn’t. They would have gotten an eyeful.

I grab my wife’s hand. “Shall we greet our guests?”

We get to the doors as Trevor opens them. Everyone we know is here. Some of them are smirking as they say hello to us. But thankfully, no one ruins the surprise.

My brother’s family is one of the last to arrive, and the party is in full swing when Tara pats me on the chest. She knows me well, and I should have known I wouldn’t be able to pull something over on her.

“What are you up to, Baker?”

I shake my head and try to look innocent. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She looks at me with a raised eyebrow. “You know, I thought it was weird when you wanted to have a company Christmas party but you didn’t want me to plan it.”

I lift my shoulders in a shrug. “I know how busy you are—”

“And,” she interrupts me, “this is not just the people from the company. This is everyone we know.”

I raise my head to look as if I hadn’t noticed. I see everyone standing around, some eating, some dancing. But she’s right. Pretty much everyone we know is here.

I catch Trevor’s eye and nod at him.

He walks toward me with a mic in his hand and gives it to me. Luckily, he doesn’t ogle my wife again.

“Thank you, Trevor.” Tara watches the exchange, and I grab her hand. “Come with me.”

She whispers loudly, “Now? We can’t disappear now.”

I stop at the front of the room and turn the microphone on.

I’ve never been a fan of public speaking, but it doesn’t faze me tonight.

I thank everyone for coming and tell them how important each and every one of them are to us. And then I continue. I’m still holding the mic, but I turn to Tara.

“I love you, Tara. You and our kids have made me the happiest man ever. It was twenty years ago we got married. In these last 20 years, I’ve learned exactly what’s important, and that’s my relationship with you. I know I’m not always the most romantic or the most sentimental, but I couldn’t let another day go by without telling you—in front of family, friends, hell, everyone we know—that I love you more with every passing day.”

Speechless, she looks up at me with unshed tears. Her hand is rubbing across my belly. “I love you, too, Baker.”

Unable to take my eyes off her, I point to the crowd around us. “This is really our anniversary party, but I’m hoping that we can renew our vows.”

The pastor that married us all those years ago steps out from the crowd and stops next to us. Tara looks at him and then back at me, nodding her head.

Then again in front of everyone, we exchange our vows. It’s the easiest thing I’ve ever done because there’s no doubt that I’ll spend eternity loving Tara.

The ceremony is quick, and when it’s over, I grab the microphone. “Okay, everyone eat and be merry. I’m stealing my wife. We’ll be back.”

The crowd laughs as I practically drag Tara from the room.

“Baker, I can’t believe you put all this together.”

“Haven’t you realized I’d do anything to make you happy?”

She shakes her head. “But I am happy.”

I cup her face in my hands. “You wanted a Christmas wedding, but neither one of us wanted to wait until the next Christmas. This is my way of trying to make it right. I never want you to have any regrets.”

“Regrets? Baker, that’s crazy. I mean, tonight is perfect. And man, I love you so much for doing this, but I wouldn’t change one thing about our wedding. All that mattered to me then and now is that you’re mine.”

I kiss her again, but it’s not enough. “There’s no doubt about that, Tara. I was yours the day you came to work for me.”

I stroke my hand down her body and cup her breast. “I need you, honey.”

She presses her body into mine. “I’m yours.”

I pull the hem of her dress up. “Damn straight you are.”

I take my time loving my wife. The party goes on in the other room, but the main event is happening right here.

Her Christmas Soldier

Chapter 1

Cassie

“How did I let you talk me into this?” I say into the car. I have my phone on Bluetooth, talking to my sister, Alison.

“Uh, because I wasn’t going to let you sit around here and mope, that’s why.” She snorts.

“I wasn’t moping,” I lie to her. Obviously I was moping. Actually I was downright about to go out of my mind.

“Cass, you know that you couldn’t have set here in our Christmassy filled house, opening Christmas gifts and making cookies knowing that Gavin was at his house alone. Let’s be honest. It didn’t take much pushing to get you to go there.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. I would have gone crazy knowing that Gavin Dawson was alone for Christmas. I pull to the side of the road when I get to his street. “I’m on his street,” I tell her, almost holding my breath.

She gasps, and I hear her clapping her hands together excitedly. “Oh, Cassie, this is so exciting!”

I just shake my head and roll my eyes. “Ya know, you are probably supposed to be talking me out of this, right? I’m going to a man’s house, one that I’ve never met and offering to stay a few days with him to bring him Christmas cheer. Like, any other sister would be dead set against this.”

“Cassie, we’ve been over this. You’ve been talking to him for over a year now. He’s a decorated soldier that is coming

home for Christmas. I've read all your emails, well most of them anyway, and he seems harmless—

"Harmless! Ha! He's a trained to kill soldier. You don't know he's harmless," I huff at her.

"Fine, come on home then. If you truly think you should be scared of him, then turn the car around and come home."

I hold my hands over my face. I know he's not harmless. But he's a good man. A year of emailing back and forth would have indicated if he was some kind of psycho or something. He's not. He's a good man.

"No, I'm going. I have to," I tell her. I don't have to explain it to her. She gets it.

"Good for you, sis. I know you're nervous, but you're going to be fine. I'm going to miss spending Christmas with you, but this is definitely more important."

Which reminds me. I cover my smirk with a cough. "I'm having your Christmas present delivered to you. Actually, it should be there any minute, so I'm going to let you go."

"Wait, Christmas present, what are you talking about?"

I hear the doorbell ring, and I can't stop the wide smile from forming. "That's probably it. I love you, sis. I'll text you later."

I hit the hang up button and look at the road in front of me. It's starting to snow, and already the roads are covered. *What are you doing, Cassie? He lives a half mile up the road. You can do this.*

Needing some motivation, I open the email app on my phone and go to the Gavin Dawson folder. As soon as I do, I go straight to the email I've been rereading for weeks.

Dear Cassie,

I can't believe we've been emailing back and forth for over a year now. I also can't believe that I'm leaving the Army at the end of next month. I know it's going to be different. This is the only life I've known since I was eighteen years old. So

twenty-two years of doing this, something I love, it's going to be hard leaving it behind.

I know you asked me about my Christmas traditions. First of all, I love how much you love Christmas. Just reading about it in your emails makes me smile. So I don't want to bum you out when you read this. But I've never celebrated Christmas before.

I was raised in foster care and well, we'll just say it was never a priority with our foster parents. And then when I got into the Army, they do what they can to celebrate it, but well, it's just not something I've ever got into.

Are you still talking to me? I figure you're going through all my emails and deleting them and then you're going to block me after that. I'm sorry. I do want you to know that knowing you, talking to you, it's probably the closest thing I've ever gotten to that Christmas magic that people talk about.

I'm going to miss emailing you when I get out. I hope you know how much I appreciate you. Who knew that first tin of cookies you sent me would lead to us "talking" over a year later? I'm a lucky man that your Christmas tradition of sending cookies to people in the Army landed in my lap.

Anyway, now that I've completely gone way too sappy, I need to change the subject.

I hope you are doing well, and I'm glad you're loving your kindergarten class this year. I may not "know" you, but I do know those kids are sure lucky to have you for their teacher.

Anyway, I'll talk to you soon.

Your friend,

Gavin Dawson

My head falls back onto the seat. It still pains me to hear that he's never celebrated Christmas. And that's why I'm here. Of course it bothers me that he never mentioned meeting each other. I had hoped that when he got out, he would at least want to meet. But unfortunately, that wasn't the case. Heck, we've never even swapped pictures. It's like he knew we were only

short term, and that's all he wanted, but I let myself hope for something more.

Regardless, I know that as his friend, I can't let him spend Christmas alone. I look into the back seat of my car at all the Christmas supplies. I brought everything. A tree and all its trimmings, a wreath, tins of cookies, hot chocolate and presents. I'm ready for this. There's no turning back now.

I shift the car into drive and pull out onto his road.

Gavin

I've been home less than twenty-four hours, and already I'm about to go stir crazy. I sit in the La-Z-Boy chair and rock, hoping to pass some time. I've already gone grocery shopping, cleaned the house from top to bottom, and chopped wood since I got home, and now I'm wondering what I'm going to do with myself. I've been an early riser for so long, I don't know what it is to sleep in anymore. It's early in the morning, and even though I would never have cared before, I can't help but notice it's Christmas Eve. And instantly my thoughts go to Cassie and what she's doing right now.

She's probably cooking, baking or doing something to celebrate the holiday. There's a longing in my chest that causes me to rub my hand over it. The first time I felt the twinge, I thought I was having a heart attack. But the closer I got to my discharge date, and the more I thought about not talking to Cassie anymore, the worse the twinge got. Now it's like a constant pressure right over my heart.

I lace my fingers together and put them over my stomach, rocking back and forth in the chair. Cassie. That's all I've thought about. My twenty-two-year career in the Army I can survive without. It will take getting used to, but it's doable. But I'm beginning to wonder if I made the right decision about Cassie. This last year I got to know her more than I know anyone. Fuck, more than my own foster brother. There were times I was vulnerable with her, and heck, that's not me. I'm

not that way. But she was too easy to trust. She was too everything. Too loving, too sweet, too smart, too caring. With very little ease, she burrowed into my life, and now I've fucked it up.

I told her we wouldn't be talking anymore when we got out. I knew it was the best thing to do. She's way too young for me and way too sweet. I'm like a cankerous old man, and all I'll do is bring her down. Nope. I made the right decision. It's better this way. With another rub to my chest, I can't help but wonder when I'm going to believe it, though.

Chapter 2

Cassie

This is it. This is where Gavin lives. I look at the mailbox and see the big white letters that say *Dawson*. There's a flutter in my chest just looking at his last name.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I get out of the car and stare up at the house. I found Gavin just by looking at old emails. I of course knew his last name was Dawson. And in one email he mentioned his brother had built his house in Mistletoe, Montana. It's a three-hour drive from me, and I can't help but wonder if he knew that or not. Did he ever even think about meeting me one day?

I shake my head, determined to get rid of the feelings of despair. *This is not what this is about, Cassie. This is about Gavin not spending Christmas alone. That's it.*

I grip the rearview mirror and try to talk myself into walking up the driveaway and stepping onto the porch. It's a beautiful ranch style house with a porch swing. There are no other houses on this street. I eye the swing again and immediately think of his foster brother, Baker. He has to be responsible for the porch swing because Gavin doesn't really seem like the type to spend time on a porch swing.

I release my hold on the car and take tentative steps toward the porch. *You can do this, Cassie*, I chant to myself over and over. Worst case scenario, I leave without him even knowing it's me. I don't have to tell him who I am.

With much more confidence than I feel, I knock soundly on the door and take a step back.

I wait, wondering again for the zillionth time what he looks like. And if he's going to be disappointed by what I look like. I pull the hem of my jacket down, trying to cover my wide hips a little more when suddenly the door swings open... and I'm staring down the barrel of a shotgun. Maybe I should have waited a little longer for the sun to come fully up.

I stagger back, almost falling on my butt before finally getting my ground and staying upright. I stare up at him, and he is definitely a force to reckon with. His reddish blond hair is a little shaggy, and it looks as if he hasn't shaved in a few days. He's big and muscular, his tight thermal shirt showing off every muscle of his chest and arms.

I look up into his eyes and notice that he's staring at me too, but instead of the long glance up and down my body, it's more of a glance over... and maybe a dismissive shrug.

"I, uh, yeah, I should probably go," I mutter before turning on my heel.

I run-walk back to my car, trying to hold back the tears. I knew he would be handsome, but I guess I thought it wouldn't matter. I could do what I came to do and leave. But seeing him, I know I couldn't be around him without looking like a stalker. Heck, I've already ogled him. I guess he's lucky I didn't push him into the house and force myself on him at this point.

When I finally make it to my car, I start to open the door when an arm comes out of nowhere, and a hand lands on the door, stopping me from opening it.

"Wait," he breathes right next to my ear. "Who are you?"

I don't answer him, but I can't resist. I turn around to where I'm looking up into his blue eyes. I blink but still can't utter a word.

I look at his full lips with longing before turning away again.

"Cassie? Is that you?" he asks.

Gavin

Her head drops between her shoulders, and I hear a muffled, “Yes.”

Without second guessing myself, I put my hands on her shoulders and turn her around. I stare at her and take her in from head to toe. She’s here. She’s really here.

Her blond hair is in a high ponytail. Her hazel eyes are big and wide and don’t hide a single emotion that crosses her face. Her body is trembling, and I don’t know if it’s from the cold or because she’s nervous.

She was hard to resist before I ever saw her... now I have a face to go with her name, and I know that I’ll never be able to get her out of my mind.

“You’re here. You’re really here,” I tell her, my hands sliding up her shoulders to wrap on each side of her neck. I angle her face so she’s looking up at me.

She grabs on to my forearm. “I’m here. I hope that’s okay.”

I stare at her in wonder. How did she find me? What is she doing here? “Come in, I’m sorry, what am I thinking?” I tell her as she shivers again.

I put my hand to the small of her back and walk her back up the driveway, up the front steps, and inside the house.

“Here, let me take your coat, then you can sit by the fire.” Her teeth start to chatter, and I help her quickly out of her coat. I almost miss the clothes rack because I’m staring at her as she moves toward the open flames. It was hard to tell in the bulky winter jacket, but now there’s no denying it. Cassie has a body made for sin. She brings out every one of my savage thoughts. Her waist leads into wide hips, and I have to stand my ground so I don’t chase after her to put my hands on her. She’s tempting, and the insecure way she looks at me over her

shoulder tells me that she has no idea how tantalizing she really is.

I take a deep breath and follow behind her. "Have a seat," I tell her as I lay a blanket over top of her.

"Thanks," she says. "So I bet you're wondering what I'm doing here."

I just shrug and try to hide my smile. I don't care why she's here. The only thing that matters to me is the fact that she's here.

"So I know you probably think I'm a stalker."

I shake my head. "No, I don't."

She giggles, and the sound is probably the most glorious thing I've ever heard. "Okay, that's good. Well, I've thought a lot about our emails, and well, I know that you didn't plan on us talking anymore, but I had to come and do this."

I move to the end of my seat and lean forward. There's a decent distance between us, but with how tall I am, our knees are almost touching. "Do what?"

"All I've been able to think about is you here by yourself at Christmas. I came because I wanted to repay you. I didn't want you to be alone. I wanted you to experience Christmas."

I sit back in my chair, stunned. I never open up with anyone, but with her I did. She knows that I never celebrate Christmas. And now she's here... to share it with me.

"What about your sister?" I remember her telling me that she and her sister and sometimes her stepbrother spend every Christmas together since their parents moved to Florida and usually take a cruise at Christmas time.

She holds her hands up and laughs. "Don't worry. I called in reinforcements. She won't be alone for Christmas."

I'm still a little shaken up by what she's saying. "So... you're going to spend Christmas here... with me?"

Her eyes widen. "Well, I mean, gosh when you say it that way it sounds really presumptuous. I can just leave everything.

I don't have to spend Christmas here. I can just set it up and go."

"No! I mean, if you've come all this way, I think it's only right I get the full effect, right?"

She starts to take the blanket off, and I panic that she's about to leave. She covers my knee with her hand, and I can't look anywhere except at her soft hand with pink tipped fingernails. "You can tell me the truth. I can leave if this makes you uncomfortable."

I look into her eyes. The only thing that's uncomfortable is the way my cock is reacting to her touch. My jeans tighten between my thighs. "I'm not uncomfortable. I want you to stay."

"Yay!" she laughs, jumping out of her chair, and starts bouncing toward the door. "I have to get stuff out of my car. You wouldn't believe everything I brought. We are going to have so much fun."

She starts talking about Christmas trees and hot chocolate and who knows what else. I am too lost in thought as I help her put her coat back on and follow her out to her car. I was right about a few things. She's way too young and way too sweet. I should have sent her on her way, but I couldn't. Instead, I'm wondering how I'm going to keep my hands off of her.

She bends over and grabs something from the back seat of her car, and I barely stifle my groan. I could move a foot closer and have my hard cock buried against her soft ass.

She raises up and looks at me over her shoulder. "Thank you, Gavin. You're not going to regret this."

Fuck! I hope she doesn't come to regret it either.

Chapter 3

Cassie

Gavin insisted on carrying everything in, mumbling something about needing to run off some energy. So he handed me the wreath to carry in and I've stood in his warm, cozy house as he walks in and out carrying box after box of things. "Are you freaking out right now?" I ask him when he's made the last trip and is coming in with my suitcase.

"No, why would I be?"

I look around at all the Christmas decorations, boxes and suitcases and then back to him. "I'm not moving in or anything. I only plan to stay until the day after Christmas." I blush again, realizing that not only have I pushed my way into this man's house, now I've told him how long I plan on staying. I close my eyes and twitch my head back and forth. I swear I have more couth than this. "I mean, if that's okay."

"It's fine," he says a little gruffly. "So what's first?"

I point to the disassembled tree in the corner. "The tree." I start walking toward it, but Gavin puts a hand on my shoulder to stop me.

"Just point where you want it and I'll put it up."

"Well, it's your house... even though I seem to have taken it over. But you tell me, where do you want it?"

He looks around the room and just shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe there," he says, pointing toward the big windows.

"It's perfect."

I set up the tree stand, and he starts bringing pieces over. He lifts it all with ease, and I stand back out of his way, admiring him. My heart is racing being near him. I knew if I ever met him it was going to be comfortable. We've messaged so much this last year, I truly feel like he's my best friend. But I never expected this. We're comfortable, but there is an edge to what I'm feeling. I never dreamed he would be this attractive. His jeans are tight across his hips and thighs. His muscles ripple in his back as he works, and I swear that the temperature just went up twenty degrees while I watch him.

He finishes assembling the tree. "Now we just need to plug in the lights."

He plugs them in, and the blue twinkling bulbs light up the room. "It's perfect," he says.

I laugh and walk up to him, touching his shoulder. "Not quite yet."

I start spreading the branches. "This will make it fuller," I tell him and go to work on fluffing the tree. We work in silence, and when we circle the tree, meeting on the other side, we work next to each other. His manly scent fills my nostrils, and I cross my legs where I'm standing. A pressure is building inside me, and I feel as if I'm about to bust.

"Ornaments," I mutter, walking away to grab a box. Taking a deep breath, I turn back to him and the tree. "I wasn't sure what style you would want, so I guessed."

He peers into the box of red, white and blue ornaments and then at me. "It's perfect."

I roll my eyes. "Everything can't be perfect, Gavin. You can tell me the truth." I walk toward the tree and start putting on the ornaments. Holding the box out to him, I tell him, "Put them anywhere you want."

He takes a few out of the box and starts to hang them onto the tree. Quietly, almost so quiet I have to lean in to hear him, he tells me, "It is perfect, though. The tree, the ornaments, well, no one's ever done anything like this for me before. I'm glad you came, Cassie."

We're staring at one another. There's so much I could read into that look he's giving me, but I'm not. He didn't want a relationship with me. He was ready to end the friendship we did have. He leans forward to grab another ornament, and I hold my breath, almost hoping that he's reaching for me. But when he draws the little figure out of the box and leans away, I release my breath. "Me too. I'm glad I came too," I tell him.

Because I don't know what to say, I start to ramble. "You'd probably like a real tree better. But I didn't want to worry about your house burning down around you if you forgot to water it or something, so I thought this would be the safest bet. You could always get a real one next year if you want to."

He starts to answer, but then my phone goes off in my pocket. I hold it up between us. "It's my sister. I need to take this."

"Okay, that reminds me I need to text my foster brother too."

I nod at him and watch him as he walks away. I'm already pacing the living room when I answer the phone.

"Hey, sis!"

"Don't you hey, sis me. How could you?"

I laugh. Alison always has been melodramatic. "How could I what?"

"Invite Ben here, that's what. And then not even give me a warning."

I roll my eyes. "Really? How could I invite our stepbrother home for Christmas?"

It's almost as if I can hear her grinding her teeth. "Really? You know we don't get along."

I see Gavin standing on the back porch through the window, looking down at his phone. I know he's coming in soon, so I have to finish this call. "No, actually, what I know is that you and Ben are crazy for each other, have been since our mom married his dad, but you're too stubborn to see where it

goes. So let your guard down, be nice to him, and let it play out.”

Silence. She doesn’t say a thing, I can’t even hear her breathing. “Alison? You there?”

“I’m here. I don’t...”

“Yes you do. You like him. And he feels the same about you...”

There’s a rumbling over the phone, and she starts to whisper. “How do you know that?”

“Because you both are so obvious, everyone knows. Even Mom. You are making it into a bigger deal than it is. Just see where it goes.”

She gasps in the middle of my tirade, but I don’t stop. Gavin turns back toward the house and is about to walk in. “Look, I have to go. I love you, sis. I’m here with Gavin. I’ll be back the day after Christmas. I’ll text you later.” And then I hang up.

Maybe I should have given her some warning, but I know she would have just found a reason not to be home when Ben got there. Now, hopefully, they’ll spend some time together and work it out.

Gavin

After texting with my brother Baker, I go back inside. I was quick and to the point in my text with him, but I doubt he noticed since he was in Juniper Junction with his assistant. I don’t know what’s going on there, but I’m glad that Baker’s finally made a move.

I walk back into the living room and look at Cassie, who’s putting the finishing touches on the tree.

“Everything okay?” I ask her.

“Yep. Everything is good. Are you ready for what’s next?”

I laugh and shake my head. I'm definitely not going to be bored with Cassie here. She won't let that happen.

"I'm ready. What do you want to do?" I ask her as innocently as I can. I have a hundred things running through my mind of what I'd like to do, but none of those are on the table. *Think Christmas, Gavin.*

She walks over to a box and picks it up. "Snowman."

I look between the box and her. "Snowman?"

She opens the lid to show me a top hat, carrot, buttons and a scarf. "Yep, we're going to make a snowman."

I help her into her jacket and follow her outside. "Aren't you cold?" she asks.

"Nope. It doesn't bother me."

Her teeth are already starting to chatter. "C'mon, let's get this going. I'm thinking the quicker we get the snowman made, the quicker you can get us inside to make some hot chocolate, and I'm really hoping you brought some of your famous cookies."

"You know I did." She starts rolling up snow, and I follow after her. I don't have the heart to tell her that I've made a snowman before. She's going to all this trouble, I'm not going to do anything to ruin it.

Chapter 4

Cassie

“M mmmm,” he moans.

He’s eating his fifth—or maybe sixth—cookie, and I sit across from him on the couch sipping hot chocolate.

He picks up his mug and takes a drink, moaning around it too.

“I guess it’s okay?” I laugh.

He holds another cookie up. “How did you learn to make cookies like this? They are so good. And the hot chocolate. This is not like any hot chocolate I’ve ever tasted.”

I watch him lick his lips, and it causes somersaults in my belly. “Never trust a skinny baker. That’s why I’m so good at it,” I explain, gesturing to my belly and thighs.

His gaze goes down my body and stays there. He’s staring at me, and I pull the pillow off the couch and bring it to cover myself.

Finally, his gaze meets my eyes again. “I think you’re perfect.”

I reach out and slap my hand across his arm, but he catches me in a hold. “I do. I think you’re perfect. I can’t believe you did all this for me.”

I try to shake it off. “It’s nothing.”

He pulls me toward him, and I’m leaning over so much my chest almost touches his. “It’s not nothing. No one has ever

done anything like this for me before. This past year, I knew you were special. I was right.”

He leans in, and I know he’s aiming for my cheek. A sweet kiss to seal his compliment. But I turn my head at the last minute and capture his lips with my own. I’m sure he meant it to be a simple thank you, but I couldn’t resist tasting his lips on my own. His hands go to my back, holding me to him. His stubbled chin is scratching my face, but I don’t care. I put my hand to the back of his neck, threading my fingers through the short hairs there. Our lips mesh together, and right now is better than anything I had ever imagined.

I pull back, only because I know I made the first move, and even though he’s not fighting me on it, he’s also the one that didn’t want any kind of future with me either.

I close my eyes and open them, trying to gauge his thoughts. I told myself that I wasn’t going to ask him, but already I can feel myself weakening. “So why? If I’m so perfect... Never mind. Forget it.”

“No! What is it? Ask me. Why what?”

He’s still holding on to me, and it doesn’t seem like he’s going to let me go. “I just, well, I was just wondering. We seem to have gotten along so well.” I shrug my shoulders. “I thought we would at least remain friends. But you made it pretty clear when you left the Army that this”—I point between the two of us—“was going to be over.”

He releases me then, and it’s like a big woosh in my head as I sit back in my seat. The answer couldn’t get any plainer than that. “Forget it. It’s no big deal.” I unbend my legs out from underneath me and start to stand up.

His arm goes out to stop me, holding me down. “Wait. You’re right. And heck, after everything, you deserve an explanation.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

He tilts his head to the side. “I think I do.”

His hand reaches out and cups my jaw, his thumb rubbing soft circles on my cheek. “We did have something good.

Probably too good. All I could do was think about you. But I knew that nothing could come of this. Even friendship isn't a good idea."

"Why?"

"Cassie, you grew up with a family that loved you. You celebrated holidays and birthdays, you were there for each other when you needed one another. Everything a normal family does. I'm not normal. I haven't ever depended on anyone. I've never had a relationship, not one that lasted more than one night. I don't know how to do the give and take of one. Not even for a friendship. I knew when we were writing back and forth that nothing could come of it. Besides your age, you're just too pure and sweet for the likes of me."

"That's bullshit, and you know it," I say and almost instantly regret it. His eyes flash with surprise, and I shake my head, wondering what in the world I was thinking. Who am I to call him out? Maybe it's just an excuse he's making, and he doesn't want to say that I just don't do it for him. "Forget it. Sorry. You're entitled to feel the way you feel. Let's drop it."

I pick up my mug and take another sip. I want to argue with him so bad on this, but I'm not going to. He may have never had a relationship before, but already he's treated me ten times better than any of my previous boyfriends. Can he not see that what we have together is good? I mean really good.

I set my mug down and change the subject. "So I know I sort of steamrolled you just as you were getting back into civilian life, but tell me, how's it going being out?" I'm bristling on the inside, but I'm trying to keep my voice steady.

He looks at the Christmas tree, and a smile forms on his lips. "Well, let's see. Since I've been home, I've decorated my first ever Christmas tree. I've made a snowman, I've had the best spaghetti I've ever eaten. Thank you for dinner, by the way. Now I've had the best chocolate chip cookies and hot chocolate there is. All in all, I can't see it getting any better."

I set my mug down. "That's where you're wrong."

Gavin

She's acting like nothing's wrong. That I didn't hurt her when I pretty much ended our correspondence when I left the Army. But I know her well enough to know that she is upset by all of it. "Cassie," I start, trying to get her attention, but she just holds up her hand, indicating to give her a minute.

"I'll be right back."

I sit on the sofa and think back through the day. Her showing up here is the biggest surprise I've ever had. She could have left the Christmas decorations, cookies, all of it at home. Her being here is enough to make me happy.

I slide my hands down the front of my jeans and try to make room. That kiss did a number on me. The last thing I want to do is take advantage of her. I need to stick with the plan. We celebrate Christmas together and I let her leave. That's that.

I'm waiting patiently for Cassie to return when the doorbell rings. I tug at my jeans again when I get up and go to open the door.

I no sooner open the door than I realize my mistake. I should have looked through the peephole. I've let my guard down, and that's just another effect of being with Cassie. She makes me vulnerable. It's my neighbor from up the road. She must have found out somehow that I was back in town, probably the gossipy old lady at the grocery store.

"Gavin, hey, I wanted to stop by." I try to block the door, but she pushes past me. "I made you some dinner."

Shocked, I stand looking at Jennifer—wait, maybe her name was Heather. I met her when I was on leave over a year ago. I took her out and brought her here and I let myself get carried away making out with her. Luckily, I stopped myself before things got too out of hand, but now, by looking at the

way she's dressed, she looks as if she's ready to pick up where we left off.

"Hey, uh, thank you but we already ate," I tell her.

She must not have heard when I said *we*—or she doesn't care—because she keeps walking toward the kitchen. "That's okay. I can put it away, and we can catch up." She turns and lifts her eyebrows at me when she says *catch up*, and instantly I get her meaning.

Right at the moment Heather—or is it Jennifer?—walks back into the living room, Cassie walks in carrying a big stack of wrapped presents. I take them from her and set them on the chair behind me. "Cassie..." I start, wanting to explain but am interrupted.

"Oh! Hello, I didn't know we had visitors." The woman in the low cut dress and bright red lipstick walks toward Cassie with her hand held out. "I'm Jennifer."

Cassie looks surprised and dare I say a little hurt before she hides the look and smiles at Jennifer. "Hi, I'm Cassie."

They do a quick handshake before dropping their hands.

I pull Cassie into my side. "My girlfriend." Cassie tenses under my arm, but her smile doesn't change.

Jennifer's lips form a perfect "o," and with a bitter laugh she says, "I would have guessed niece or daughter. She's awful young, isn't she?"

Cassie turns to her side, forming her body against mine. One arm goes around my back, and the other lays on my flat stomach. I pull her in closer to me. Her in my arms just feels right, but I still get a little defensive when Jennifer insinuates that Cassie is too young for me. She's twenty-five and a grown woman.

"Not too young. I just know a good man when I see one," Cassie says before lifting up on her toes. I lean down to kiss her lips. One touch is all it takes, and already I'm hard for her again. I pull Cassie around so she's hugging my front. I don't need Jennifer to see what Cassie does to me just by being near her.

I look over at the other woman over Cassie's head. "I don't mean to be rude, but Cassie and I haven't seen each other in a while, and we have a lot of time to make up for."

The woman huffs and stomps toward the door.

Chapter 5

Cassie

“Is she gone?” I ask Gavin.

I know she is. I heard her heels stomping across the wood floor and the door slam shut. But Gavin still hasn’t moved. I shouldn’t complain. I could stay right here, just like this forever. Wrapped in his arms feels so good. His hands slide down my back, and his lower body bumps against mine. I barely stop the gasp from leaving my lips when I feel his hard bulge pressed against my belly. For just a second I get my hopes up. Could that be for me? Or is it because he’s been without a woman for so long that any woman would do? There’s no way of knowing, and I’m sure as heck not going to ask him.

“She’s gone,” he says, and I can feel his breath ruffling the hair on the top of my head.

There’s a strain in his voice, and I know I should back away, but I don’t. I move closer to him, and a small growl escapes him. I smile against his chest.

I could ask him what’s wrong, but instead I act like I don’t even notice it. I pull back and let my arms fall to my side. I cross my arms over my chest. “Ex-girlfriend?”

He shakes his head, seemingly rattled by all of it. “No. We went on one date. She wanted more. I didn’t.”

I turn away to pick up the packages. “Oh yeah? When did you go on a date?” I ask as innocently as I can. I hold my breath waiting for an answer. It’s really none of my business, but right now I’m imagining all the letters we sent back and

forth, and I can't help but wonder if he was also talking to her all this time. I mean, all we did was email back and forth, but if he has been dating women, maybe that will make it easier for me to walk away the day after tomorrow.

"Over a year ago," he says, and almost as an afterthought he says, "Before I got your cookies last year."

I just shrug like it doesn't matter, but in fact my mind is running a hundred miles an hour. It was before we met.

I turn to him with the packages between us. "So before any more girlfriends show up..."

"I don't have girlfriends. I told you that," he says with a blush on his face. At least he's embarrassed that the woman showed up.

"Right. Well, before any ex one-night stands..."

"I didn't sleep with her either," he says, crowding me.

I push the packages into his arms. "It's none of my business anyway. Here you go."

He takes the packages, and I walk over to the couch and sit down.

There's a part of me fuming and wondering if I should just go. If I wasn't here, would he have asked Jennifer to stay?

Gavin sets the presents on the couch between us. "What are you thinking about?"

I push the hair off my face and look him in the eye. Regardless of how I feel about him, I came here with the main mission of him having a good Christmas. "I'm just wondering if I should leave." My heart breaks a little even as I say it, but I keep the smile plastered to my face.

"Leave? You're not leaving."

I shrug my shoulders. "I mean, I came because I didn't want you to be alone on Christmas. I wanted you to have a good one. If I wasn't here, well, if I leave, I'm sure Jennifer would come back."

He reaches around the packages and grabs my hand, holding it in his. "Don't even think that way. We've had such a good day, don't let this ruin it. I want you here." I look at him with a tilt of my head, wondering if he's telling the truth. He doesn't want me. There's no future in this, but he doesn't want me to go.

What was I thinking when I came here? Did I really think coming and spreading a little holiday cheer and then leaving was going to be a good idea? If he was some kind of asshole, this would make it so much easier.

Gavin

I can understand why she's feeling the way she is, and I'm cussing myself that she's been put into this position. She's been so good to me. She's listened to me vent, and she's always been upbeat and happy. She's worried about me and has sent me so many packages this past year that I've lost count. She probably doesn't realize it, but she made this last year the best of my life.

Even before she showed up here, I was having trouble with our goodbye. Back on base, or wherever I was, there were nights I dreamed of her. Even though I had never seen her before, I knew it was her. I thought about her all the time, and I don't know why I thought I could just erase her from my memory. I don't know what I'm going to do now that she's here, and I've seen her face to face. I'll now have a face and a body to think about, and her curvy body definitely does it for me. I want to say hell with it all and carry her into my bedroom, but one look into her big hazel eyes that look at me with so much trust, I know I can't.

"I don't want you to feel this way, Cassie. What can I do to convince you that I'd rather be here with you?"

I know exactly where her mind goes because it's the same place mine's been. She wants me, I know she does. Probably as much as I want her.

“Forget it. Forget I said anything. We’ve had such a good day and tomorrow’s Christmas. And now, it’s time for presents.” She gestures to the stack of presents between us.

Chapter 6

Cassie

I need to get us back on solid ground. Mission Merry Christmas back in full effect. I pick up one of the boxes and set it on the coffee table and then take the rest to put under the tree. “It’s always been a tradition that we open one present on Christmas Eve. So here you go.”

He holds his hands up, waving me off. “I’m not opening that.”

My hand falls to my lap with the small gift. “Why not?”

“I can’t open a gift.” He stops and shakes his head, his eyes wide in disbelief. He’s waving it off like it’s crazy that I got him something.

“Why not?” I ask him, confused.

He gets up and starts pacing the living room. “I’m not going to open a gift when I didn’t get you anything.”

I laugh. “Is that all? My sister sent me a gift to open because she knew I was surprising you. It’s okay, Gavin.”

He still looks uncomfortable with it, but I’m not stopping with this. He’s going to open a gift for Christmas.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell him and go and grab one of the presents that my sister sent.

“See?” I tell him, holding it up. “We’ll both open one.”

I sit back down on the couch and pat the spot next to me. “C’mon, take a seat.”

I'm so excited about this that I can't stand it. He mentioned this to me one time a long time ago, and I hope he loves what I got him.

"I just don't feel right about this, Cassie. You've already done so much. I don't want you buying me gifts too."

I roll my eyes. "Are you for real right now? You don't know how excited I am to give this to you. Please, I think you'll love it."

I force the package into his hands, and he holds it like it's a ticking time bomb.

Gavin

I look between the wrapped present and back to Cassie. Is she for real? I can't believe she got me something. "Cassie..." I start, but emotion thickens in my throat, and I stop.

Without even having to say anything, she gets it. She understands what I'm feeling right now. She knows some of my past. No family, no holidays, no birthdays, and of course no presents. But I don't think she realizes what this means to me right now.

Her hand reaches out and covers mine. "It's okay, really. If you don't want to open it, we can just stick it under the tree."

There's sadness on her face as she says it, and my heart skips a beat. The smile that's been on her face since she's got here is gone and in its place is gloom. I did that to her. *Fuck, Gavin. Why did you have to ruin it?*

"If you're sure that's what you want, I'll open it. But I'm getting you something."

Her face lights up again, and I know I've made the right decision. "You don't have to get me a thing. My favorite part of Christmas is giving to others. Really, seeing you open this is going to be gift enough," she says, pointing to the present I still have gripped in my hands.

I look down at it and carefully start to pull at the bow on top. I don't want to rip anything, so I go slowly.

Cassie smirks but doesn't say a word. She's sitting next to me acting as if she's patient, but her leg is bouncing, telling me just how excited she is about it. I swear she's about to reach over and rip the paper open.

When I finally get the box uncovered and lift the lid, I gaze down into the box in shock. "What...? How did you?" I ask her as I take it out of the box.

In my hand is an original PEZ dispenser with the blue Batman on it. I grip it in my hand and then have to force myself to let up a little. I can't believe she remembered this. I told her when I was younger, I was given a blue Batman PEZ dispenser from one of my caseworkers. It wasn't new or anything, something the case worker had when she transported kids. She gave it to me when she dropped me off at the new home I was going to. The home where I met my foster brother, Baker.

Anyway, it was taken from me at the new home, and I briefly mentioned that in one of my letters.

"Cassie..." I start, not knowing what to say.

She waves her hand in between us. "It's no big deal. Open it up. See if the candy is as good as you remember it."

I open the package and start inserting the little rectangle candies into the dispenser. I take longer than necessary because I'm a little choked up. Fuck, if the guys could see me now. They'd call me a pussy for sure.

I finish loading it and grab her hand, turning it upside down to hold out for me. I put a piece of candy in it and then pop one in my mouth.

We both suck on the candies, just smiling at each other. "I know it's not much, but you like it, right?"

"I love it," I tell her. The whole time she's smiling up at me, and I pull her to me for a hug. It would be so easy to change those words up and tell her I love her right now. I know I've felt more for her than just like. I hold on to her, and

my hug is fierce, probably too hard, but she doesn't resist or free herself. I'm resting my chin on her head, and we sit there while I try to figure out how in the world I'm supposed to let this woman leave my life in two days.

Chapter 7

Garvin

I pull back from her. “Thank you, Cassie.” I hold the candy dispenser tight in my hands and hold it to my chest. I don’t think I can express to her what this means to me.

“It’s no big deal, really,” she says, but I can tell that she’s pleased by my reaction.

“It is, though... to me.” I lean back before I do something stupid, like kiss her again. “I guess it’s your turn now.”

“Yep!” she says, picking up the box from the coffee table.

Unlike me, she rips off the ribbon and the wrapping paper in one fast swoop. She fights with the taped edge of the box and eventually just rips it open, sending the item inside to the floor.

I reach over to pick it up and bring it up to hand to her, but the soft black material draws my attention. I hold it up between us, and Cassie’s face turns fifty shades of red.

“Oh my God!” she exclaims, reaching for it. She stuffs it back into the box, but it’s too late. The damage is done. “My sister, how embarrassing.”

Her sister gave her an almost see-through nightie, and already I’m picturing Cassie in it with it wrapped around her curves. She is trying to put the silky material back into the box, but it seems to just slide around before she huffs, wadding it up and stuffing it in.

“So I’m going to get ready for bed.”

“Cassie, wait,” I tell her, holding back a groan. I’m so screwed, even her mentioning the word bed is enough to raise my desire another notch.

“No, I’m going to go.” She gets up, and I stand up too and start to follow her. Like a horny teenager, my cock is bulging in my pants, but I ignore it. I’ve come to the conclusion it’s just going to be a permanent state as long as Cassie is around.

“You don’t have to go to... bed,” I croak out. An image of her in the nightgown, sliding across the sheets of my big bed in the guestroom comes to light in my head, and I clutch on to the back of the couch.

She stops when she gets to the door. Her cheeks are still red, but at least she’s looking at me. “I had a great day today, Gavin. Good night.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to stop her, to beg her to stay, but I don’t. Instead I watch her disappear in the room and shut the door behind her. “Me too,” I whisper into the empty room.

Cassie

I throw myself across the bed and bang my head on the pillow. I jerk my phone off the nightstand and text my sister.

Really?!? That’s the gift you wanted me to open on Christmas Eve. Really?

Her reply is almost instant. *Yes. I figured you would need them since I took out your old lady pajamas.*

I gasp and jump off the bed, throwing open my suitcase. Sure enough, there’s no pajamas. Not even something I could use as a nightshirt.

You went too far!!! I text her back.

The little bubbles pop up, and then another text comes through. *Oh really? You probably went too far by sending Ben here too without telling me.*

I jab into the phone. *It was for your own good.*

I get two laughing emojis and then, *The nightie was for your own good too. Just admit you love the guy and be done with it.*

I roll my eyes. *You admit you love Ben and be done with it.*

That seems to stump her because a few minutes go by before I get the next text. *I just want you happy. Be happy. Merry Christmas, sis.*

Damn. I never could stay mad at her. *I want you happy too. Love you. Merry Christmas.*

I throw myself down on the bed and quietly groan into the pillow. I still can't believe I opened that barely-there nightgown in front of Gavin. He probably thinks I'm a stalker and had this all planned out.

I grab the offensive nightie off the bed and go to the joined bathroom. A hot shower and bed. Maybe after that I'll be ready for tomorrow and another day of spending time with Gavin.

I take my time in the shower and then lie back down in the bed. I never did thank Alison for the nightgown. It is a nice one. I run my hands across the smooth material on my stomach and down to my thighs. Of course, I'm sure women in Montana need more than this flimsy material to keep them warm.

My thoughts instantly go to a certain military man, knowing he could keep me hot all night long. I groan and cover my face with my arm.

I lie in the bed for what seems like hours, but I know I'm not going to be able to sleep.

I get up and tiptoe to the door, opening it quietly. All the lights are off in the living room, and when I look toward Gavin's bedroom door, the light seems to be off there.

I'll just heat up some hot milk, and maybe that will help me sleep.

I walk as quietly as possible to the kitchen and with the light from my phone and the moon shining in the window, I search for a pan. Luckily, I know where to look, considering I made spaghetti earlier.

I pour milk into the pan and turn the stove on before leaning back on the counter by the sink. I cross my arms over my chest and rub my arms up and down. I definitely should have grabbed a sweater or something.

The milk starts to warm, and I turn to the drawer with the cooking spoons. I have my hand wrapped around one when the lights flip on. I freeze with my eyes clenched shut. *Please tell me this isn't happening.*

Chapter 8

Garvin

I can't sleep. All I can think about is the soft material of that nightgown and the feel of Cassie in my arms when I held her.

My cock is so hard I feel as if I'm about to explode. I can take care of it easily. With my dick in my hand, I stroke myself once, then twice when I hear footsteps outside my bedroom door. I lift up in the bed and listen closely, and noises from the kitchen have me on my feet.

I fight with myself all of two minutes before I decide to go and check on her. She's not used to the house or the kitchen; the only hospitable thing to do is to help her. I pull on a pair of jeans, open the bedroom door, and walk down the hall. As soon as I get to the kitchen door, I open it and flip on the light.

Fuck me!

There's matching fucking panties too. How did I miss that?

The black nightie is short, showing off her lush ass.

Like a fuckin' wet dream, Cassie is bent over the counter in the kitchen, looking in a drawer for something, and I'm standing here about to shoot a load into my jeans.

Without another thought, I walk across the kitchen and put my hands on each side of her, caging her into the counter. She still hasn't moved, and I know I've shocked her.

My breath is heavy as I whisper her name. "Cassie."

Her head drops between her shoulders, and her knuckles are turning white from the hard hold she has on the spoon in

her hand. “Yeah?” I hear her murmur.

Her voice is thick and filled with emotion, but she still doesn’t move. “Baby, I’m sorry,” I tell her as I lean in and press my body to her backside. Her head raises, and she gasps, her hips automatically flexing toward me. My bulge fits nicely right between her plump ass cheeks. I pull her hair to the side, exposing her long neck. I want to taste her—hell, I want to fuck her so bad I can taste it, but not yet. Not until I have her permission.

“Can I kiss you?”

She looks at me over her shoulder, her eyes hooded. She gives me one nod before I have her hair wrapped around my fist and I’m pulling her face toward me so I can taste her lips.

She turns toward me, her arms going around my neck in a tight embrace as if she’s holding on for dear life.

I heft her into my arms and groan when my cock rubs against her inner thighs. We barely get out of the kitchen before she’s struggling to get out of my arms.

“No, baby, please let me have you,” I beg, not wanting to let her go. There’s a fire burning inside me, and I don’t know what I’ll do if she denies me.

Her lips are on mine, then my cheek, my neck and my ear. “Milk,” she moans.

I turn to the stove and notice the milk boiling. With her still in my arms, because I’ll be damned if I’m going to let her go, I walk over and turn it off before striding back to my bedroom. I toss her onto the bed and stand over her with my chest heaving. Her nipples are peaked, the thin material of her nightie stretched across her large breasts. The material is skimming her belly, showing off her low-cut panties and thick, creamy thighs.

“Fuck, I couldn’t get you and this nightie off my mind,” I tell her before I suck her plump nipple in my mouth right through the material.

I rip my lips away and pull the material up her body, tossing it into the floor. “I have to taste you,” I tell her before

latching on to her breast.

Her hands are everywhere. Across my shoulders, down my back, and when I suckle her nipple, her nails dig into my back.

I move down her body, kissing and licking every sweet spot until I get to the core of her. There's a wet spot on her panties, and I bury my nose in it. "Fuck," I moan, pressing my cock into the bed almost painfully. I lift off just to take my jeans down and then pull her panties down her legs and push my shoulders between her legs, holding her open.

My fingers slide through her wet, swollen lips. She's mewling and twisting underneath me but there's no fuckin' way I'm not tasting her. Not now.

I put my muscled arm across her lower hips and hold her down while I work my tongue through her slit. She tastes so sweet I know I'm going to be addicted to her before the night is over.

"Forgive me, Cassie. But I have to have you. I need you on my dick, now," I tell her as I climb up her body. I lift her up so she's sitting on my lap, my knees underneath me.

With one hand at her back to hold her and the other on the girth of my dick, I guide myself inside her. She's snug and tightens herself on me the further I go. "That's it, baby. Take it," I whisper to her.

She slides down my body until I'm fully seated inside her. My hips start pumping, and I slide my hand down between us. Circling her clit, I plunge in and out of her. She's about to come; I can feel her heat soaking my thighs. With my hand wrapped around her neck, I pull her lips to mine, and as soon they meet, she's exploding all around me. Her hips move erratically, but I don't stop. I keep pounding into her, taking her over the edge until she's milking me, and I'm shooting rope after rope of cum deep inside her.

We both fall down on the bed, and I'm breathless as he lies on top of me. He starts to move, but I wrap my arms and legs around him, stopping him. He lifts his head, and his eyes search mine. "I'm not leaving," he says, brushing my hair off my face.

I loosen my hold on him, and he lies down beside me, pulling me against him. I don't dare move. He's holding me like I'm the most precious thing to him, and I don't want him to regret this.

"Cassie," he whispers against my hair and then kisses my head.

"Yeah?"

His hands slide down my stomach, stroking my belly. "I'm going to need you again."

I laugh, thinking he's joking but realize quickly he's not. He takes my hand in his and brings it down to the hard, thick rod between his legs. "I'm not joking."

I don't dare even hope for more than tonight, so I'll agree to whatever he wants. He pulls me until I'm on top of him. My legs slide to each side of him, and I shimmy around until he's right at my core. I lean back, pushing him inside me. There are still tiny little flutters from my orgasm, and I'm super sensitive, but I still take him. I'll take him every chance I get.

I move up and down, his hands gripping my hips almost painfully. "Yes," he moans, urging me on.

So I don't stop. I move over top of him slowly, then fast, moving my hips back and forth, side to side and around in circles until we fall into a perfect rhythm.

My reckless moans fill the room, but I'm too far gone to care. "Come for me, Cassie," he moans against my lips, and I do as he asks, coming all around him.

He holds me and lays me down next to him. He's cocooned around me, and I'm already drifting in and out of sleep. It isn't long before I'm passed out in his arms, dreaming of forever.

Chapter 9

Garvin

I jolt awake and then lie perfectly still, trying to get my bearings. In the Army, I would wake up at all hours and never really slept a lot. These last few hours are probably the deepest I've ever slept. Cassie is half on top of me, her legs intertwined with mine, and her arm is sprawled across my stomach.

My hand on her back slides down her naked form, and already my heart starts racing at the thought that I could have her again. I could roll her to her back and bury my cock deep inside her. That's what I'm craving to do. But I know I can't.

Somewhere in the third time I had her last night, she grimaced in pain, and I knew that I had pushed her too hard. I tried to stop, but she begged me not to, and so I finished, bringing her another orgasm and then shooting my seed deep inside her womb.

No matter how much I want her, I know I can't. I need to give her time to heal and time to figure out what she wants to do. All I know is I have to get out of this bed before I find myself in a situation where I can't stop.

I kiss her lightly on the top of her head and slowly start to move. I slide out from the bed and stand over her, watching her sleep. Already, after one night she is an addiction. Nothing has changed. I'm still not good for her, but I don't know how I'm going to let her go.

I grab my clothes and walk out into the living room to get dressed. I need a distraction. I put on my boots and walk out

the back door to cut wood and release some of my frustration.

Cassie

The sound of the door shutting jars me awake. I slide my hand across the bed, and I can still feel the warmth from where Gavin was lying next to me. I curl to my side, pulling his pillow to my face, and breathe in his scent. I still can't believe we slept together last night. My thoughts start to stray that maybe it was because he had been without someone for so long, maybe that's why he was unable to resist me. I can still see the dominating look in his eyes. He wanted me, there was no doubt. I'm just not sure why.

I climb out of bed and go to the guest room, grab some clothes, and get straight into the shower, letting the hot water roll down my body. I don't take long because I'm excited and a little anxious to see Gavin.

After getting ready, I go to the living room and then the kitchen. I realize I'm holding my breath in anticipation and let it out in a long, steady breath. Because I don't know what else to do, I prepare the turkey and put it in the oven for dinner later. When I hear a cracking noise outside, I go to the window and look. Gavin is standing there, an ax over his head before he smashes it down to break the wood. Over and over, he does the same movements, and I just stand here and watch him. His face seems locked in a permanent scowl as he wipes the sweat from his brow.

My stomach starts to turn, and I'm wondering if he's regretting last night. I guess there's only one way to find out. I grab a bottle of water from the refrigerator, put my shoes and jacket on, and walk outside.

He sees me. I know he does. But he doesn't stop working. My heart seems to drop in my chest, but I keep moving until I'm standing next to him.

"Hey!" I say when he briefly looks up at me.

“Hey,” he says and brings the ax down on another piece of wood.

I feel like a fool to keep holding out the bottle of water and him not taking it, so I finally set it down against a rock. When I look at him again, he’s staring at me, but quickly averts his eyes. “You okay?” I ask.

He nods his head. “You okay?”

I just shrug my shoulders because honestly I feel like my heart is breaking in two.

He winces and swings on another piece of wood with more force, a grunt filling the air between us.

So this is it. I wondered even last night if he would regret it all this morning. I hoped not, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. I stand and watch him, committing it all to memory. The way his hair lies over his brow, the stubble of his chin, the dark blue of his eyes that seem darker than they did yesterday. The way he moves and the way his muscles flex. Watching him reminds me of last night in his arms, and I try to hold on to those feelings too. I don’t want to forget a thing.

“Well, I guess I’ll go in,” I tell him, again hoping that he’s going to say something.

When he doesn’t, I turn and walk slowly toward the house. As I get to the door, I turn and look at him one more time. He’s standing, leaning on the ax, not saying anything, just watching me.

I walk in the door, go to the guest bedroom, and slam the door before sliding to the floor. Sobs wrack through my body, but I have no choice but to let it all out. My hopes of there being something between us is gone now. He can barely look at me.

I stand up and go to pack my things. I wash my face to try to calm myself down. I have to leave now. I don’t have a choice.

Chapter 10

Gavin

“**W**here the fuck do you think you’re going?” I ask her as I come back into the house. She’s wheeling her suitcase through the living room, and I have to run to get between her and the front door.

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “I’m leaving.”

She moves to walk around me, but I slide in front of her. I put my hands up, but she jerks herself away from me. “Please, Gavin. I’m barely holding on as it is. Don’t make it worse.”

I cross my hands over my chest. I want to pick her up and carry her to the bedroom and show her exactly why she can’t leave. But she looks like she’s about to start crying, and I have no experience with crying women. I hold my hands up. “Fine. You want to leave, I’ll let you leave. But give me five minutes. Please,” I beg of her.

She looks between the door and then back at me before she sniffles and finally nods her head.

I gesture to the couch and have her sit down. I sit beside her. “I’m sorry for last night. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

She juts her chin out. “You can be as sorry as you want to, Gavin. I don’t regret it. Not a second of it.”

I hang my head, remembering the way that I gripped on to her waist. I’m sure she has bruises. And the way I took her too many times, sometimes roughly. “Well, I do. If I could go back and do things differently, I would.”

She draws back from me, pain etched on her face. “Noted. Can I go now?”

“Dammit, Cassie, talk to me. I’m sorry for being too rough. I’m sorry if I hurt you.” I get off the couch and start to pace the room. “I wouldn’t hurt you for anything.”

I don’t know how long I pace back and forth before she gets up and stands in front of me. “What exactly do you regret, Gavin?”

“Fuck, where do I start?” I look into her hazel eyes, which are red-rimmed, and it guts me to know that I’m the one that made her cry. “I’m sorry that I hurt you. I knew you were sore, but I took you anyway. And now that you’re leaving me, I regret not holding you in my arms longer this morning.”

Her hands slide up my chest, and I gasp at the contact. “Why, Gavin? Why didn’t you stay in bed with me this morning?”

My head falls, and I rest it on her forehead. Filled with shame, I admit to her, “Because I wanted you again, and I couldn’t hold you without being inside you. I’m a fuckin’ soldier. I’m disciplined. But you’re an addiction, Cassie.”

I wrap my arms around the back of her neck, fighting the urge to kiss her.

She tilts her head to the side. “So you don’t regret sleeping with me?”

I am taken back. “Is that what you thought?”

She nods her head sadly.

“It’s not that. It was never that. I love you, Cassie. I think I always have. Every time we made love last night, I was hoping that I made you pregnant. I knew I couldn’t have you again, so I had to force myself to get out of bed this morning. I know I’m too old for you, and I’m a gruff bastard most of the time, but I want you in my life. I’d do anything to keep you.”

Cassie

“Anything?” I ask him.

He puts his lips to mine gently. “Anything.”

I run my hand across his cheek, my thumb across his lower lip. His breath is heavy and nostrils flared—there’s no denying that he does in fact still want me.

I take a step back, and he reluctantly lets me go. I start to undress, and with each piece of clothing I discard, I tell him, “I love you, too, Gavin Dawson. I don’t want to leave you. I’d give anything to stay here with you.”

“You can. I hope you will,” he says in a heartfelt tone.

“Okay,” I tell him. Of course, I have a job that I just can’t quit, but all that can be worked out. “So what I want is you inside me. Right now.”

He shakes his head. “Cassie...”

“No, that’s what I want. I’m fine, and after all the emotions I’ve felt this morning, I need you, please.”

He walks toward me with big heavy footsteps. The look in his eyes has my stomach doing somersaults. When I kick off the last piece of clothing, I turn around and bend over the couch. “I’m ready.”

His hands slide across my ass. He kicks my legs apart and doesn’t waste any time pulling his cock out of his pants. He slides into me, and a long, low groan leaves me. He fills me up, his hands on my waist as he moves in and out of me. “Yes,” I moan.

He leans over me, turning my face to the side. “You’re mine, baby. From here on out, you’re mine.”

“Yess...” I moan as he kisses me.

And he releases my lips as he pounds into me, saying over and over, “Mine, mine, mine.”

Later, wrapped in his arms on the couch, with the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree lighting the room, Gavin whispers into my ear, “Merry Christmas.”

I roll in his arms. “Merry Christmas. I hope it was a good one.”

He nuzzles my neck. “The very best.”

Epilogue

Cassie

Two Months Later

“Are you sure about this, Cassie?” my sister Alison asks me.

“I’m sure.” I laugh. “Plus, it’s getting a little crowded around here.”

“Crowded? Yeah, well your boyfriend couldn’t go two months without you while you worked out a notice at the school, and he’s been shacking up here. He’s a six foot three, two hundred and seventy pound ex military man. Yeah, it’s been a little crowded.”

I turn and flash my grin at her. “I was talking about the fact that Ben is still here from Christmas and doesn’t seem to have any plans to leave.”

She blushes prettily and shakes her head, changing the subject. “But are you sure about moving to Mistletoe? I mean, really?”

Without any doubt whatsoever, I assure her, “Yes. Wherever Gavin’s at is where I want to be.”

Alison pulls me into her for a hug. I know I’m going to miss her, but we’ve both promised to keep in touch.

“You about ready?” Gavin peeks his head into the bedroom.

I walk over and wiggle my eyebrows at him. “Always.”

He gives me a quick pat on the ass. “Don’t play, Cass. You know I’ll take you right now and not care who’s watching.”

I smirk at him but take a step back. He’s right, and he’s proven it over and over. His desire for me is somewhat uncontrollable.

I follow behind him with Alison behind us. “Well, I think I got everything.” I look around the living room again to make sure I didn’t leave anything behind.

“Just one more thing,” Gavin says, and when I turn to him, I gasp. He’s down on one knee, his hands held out to me with a tiny box held up between the two of us. “Gavin!” I say, shocked.

“Cassie Coleman, I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you please do me the honor of being my wife?”

“Yes! Yes!” I scream, tackling him to the floor. He falls backwards, and my lips land on his. We roll across the floor, and I hear my sister mutter, “We’ll be outside.”

I raise up and look at Gavin. “Are you sure?”

He doesn’t even blink. “Am I sure that I want to be married to you? To go to bed each night with you and wake up with you in the morning? Am I sure that I want to have kids with you and grow old with you? Abso–fuckin–lutely.”

My forehead falls to his as he puts the ring on my finger. I kiss his lips. “I love you, Gavin.”

He just smiles and holds me tight. “I love you too, sweet Cassie.”

Epilogue 2

Dawson

Six Years Later

I 'm sitting in the audience watching our twins sing Christmas carols. In between seeing which one can sing the loudest, they are waving at me.

I laugh at their antics along with everyone else watching. I take in the Christmas decorations, lights, and fake snow knowing that Cassie had a lot to do with this. Everything is perfect; Cassie takes her Christmas decorating very seriously.

As someone that never celebrated Christmas growing up, she has definitely opened my eyes to the magic of the season.

My foster brother and his family all came to watch the performance, and we're going to dinner afterwards. My brother slaps me on the shoulder and points at my oldest son. He's older by only by a few minutes, but he never lets us forget it. "Like father, like son." My son is making faces now, and the more people laugh, the more he acts up.

I know I shouldn't, but I laugh anyway before pasting a stern frown on my face and giving him "the look." As soon as he sees it, he stops what he's doing, but the smirk doesn't leave his face.

My youngest son continues singing, enjoying the fact that his twin just got into trouble. I hate that Cassie is missing this. She has her class on the stage too and so she had to sit at the front with the other kindergarten teachers. "Uh-oh!" my brother says. Instead of putting eyes on my wife like I want to, I look back at the twins.

“What are they doing now?” I whisper to him.

My brother points in the opposite direction. “Not them... him.” I look where he’s pointing, and there’s a man standing next to Cassie, obviously trying to get her attention. Even from here, it’s obvious she’s frustrated. Without thinking about it, I’m on my feet. I walk to the side of the room and to the front. I’m not planning to cause a scene, but if that asshole touches my wife one more time, all bets are off.

Cassie spots me, and instead of irritation, I see relief on her face.

I muscle past the guy and position myself between him and Cassie. “Everything okay?” I ask her.

“It is now.”

The kids start singing the next song, and while my wife’s attention is on them, I turn to the man next to me.

In a low whisper, I tell him, “Touch my wife again, and I’ll break your arm.” I stare into his face to make sure he understands.

By the time Cassie looks back at me, the man has walked away.

She looks at the empty spot next to me. “Everything okay?”

I wrap my arms around her and hold her tightly. “Yep, everything’s perfect.” Two more songs and then chaos happens. Kids are running everywhere and people talking. Numerous parents come up to Cassie to wish her merry Christmas. The boys run up to us, and I wouldn’t doubt if they had raced to see who got here first. “What do you think, Dad? Which of us was louder?”

I give them both fist bumps. “I don’t know. You both were pretty loud.”

I pull my brother aside and ask him, “Can you take the kids with you tonight? I, uh...” I start to stutter, and my brother laughs.

“Sure thing, but you owe me one.”

I tell the boys they're going to Uncle Baker's, and they're excited to spend time with their cousins. Just as they're walking away, Cassie steps over. "Where's everyone going? They taking the boys to the restaurant?"

Instead of answering her, I ask my own question. "You done here?"

She must notice the look on my face, and she touches my arm. "Yeah, I'm done."

I grab her hand before another kid or parent can stop us.

She's huffing as we get to my truck. "Dawson, what is going on?"

It's not until I have her belted into the passenger seat and I'm in my seat with my hands wrapped around the steering wheel that I tell her, "Plans have changed, honey. Baker and Tara are taking the boys home with them."

"But—" she starts, and her voice trails off as if she finally understands. "Dawson, you're being ridiculous. I'm yours. I have your ring on my finger. Collin is just..."

"Fuck—don't say his name."

"Dawson! There's no way you can be jealous."

I press harder on the gas, thankful we only live a few miles from the school. "I wouldn't call it jealousy... I'm going to call it claiming what's mine."

She lifts her hand up with her wedding band. "Uh, I'm pretty sure you've already done that."

She doesn't get it. I'm not jealous per se, but I need to do something to get the image of another man touching her out of my head.

"You're mine, Cassie."

I pull into the driveway, and Cassie laughs. "You think I don't know that?"

I don't answer her. I get out of the truck and go around to her side.

She's already out and watching me with a smile on her face. After all these years, she knows the power she has over me.

Her arms loop around my neck, and I lift her into my arms. I should probably feel bad I haven't fed her yet. "I promise I'll get you something to eat."

She leans her head against my chest. "I'm not worried."

As soon as I get us locked in the house, I tell her, "Strip for me."

She doesn't hesitate. When we're both naked, I bend her over the couch. "Sorry, Cass. I have to be inside you. I need you."

I reach around and cup her pussy, sliding my fingers through her slit. "Fuck, you're soaked."

She whimpers as I strum her clit.

With my other hand, I guide myself to her entrance. With one thrust, I bury myself inside her. "Mine," I grunt.

"I'm yours. I'm yours. Faster, Dawson. Harder."

I thrust my hips back and pound her again. Over and over. Her legs start to shake. Her cunt is seeping, and I know she's close. I quicken my fingers on her swollen clit while I thrust in and out of her.

"Oh fuck, yes." She explodes, and I follow. Her pussy clenches on to me, and she milks my cock.

With my release painted on her womb, I tell her again, "Mine."

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V Card For Christmas

A Filthy Dirty Christmas

Chapter 1

Lincoln

I twist the cap on my beer and take a big swig. It's been one of those days. You know, where nothing seems to go right. I walk across the living room and fall onto the couch, ready to watch some SportsCenter or the History Channel or anything that will get my mind off today.

Before I can even push the button on the remote, my doorbell rings. For a split second, I debate not answering it. Bull, my pitbull, just looks up at me, tilting his head to the side. He's not concerned in the least about who might be at our door. No, he's probably wondering where his dinner is. I pet him between the ears. "Sorry, Bull. I'll get rid of whoever's at the door and then I'll get you some food."

He barks then, and I resist rolling my eyes. Some guard dog. He doesn't bark at someone at the front door, but he sure does at the idea of food. I step over him and walk to the front door, not even trying to hide my frustration when I sling open the door.

"Uh, hi. I'm your new neighbor." She giggles and shrugs her shoulders. "I just moved into the apartment above Mr. and Mrs. Jamison's garage."

She's staring at me, smiling, holding a pink box in her hands. Fuck, I'm pretty sure I've had dreams that started like this. She's curvy, and she may have on a sweater over her dress, but it does nothing to hide the deep V of her cleavage. The woman is tongue-wagging delicious. My heart is racing in my chest. "When?" I ask her.

She squints up at me, and I try to soften my voice and unflex my arms. I'm ready to pounce. She's smaller than me, and the once easy soft smile is now guarded. If she tries to run, I don't think I can just let her go. I clear my throat. "I mean, when did you move in?" What I want to say is how long have you been next door and me not know about it? How much time have I wasted? There's no way she's lived in Whiskey Run long; I would have known before now.

Her smile returns, and her big green eyes widen. "Two weeks."

It's like a punch in the gut. Two weeks this goddess has been next door and I hadn't noticed? I definitely work too fuckin' much.

I hold out my hand. "I'm Lincoln."

She juggles the box before putting in one arm and holding it against her side. When she holds her other hand out to me, I grab on to it. Her skin is so soft, I can't resist stroking my finger along the inside of her wrist. "I'm Avery," she says with a catch in her breath.

That sound. It makes me wonder what sound she'd make while I was driving into her, hands on her hips, guiding her up and down my cock. I pull my hand back and stuff them both in the front pockets of my dress pants, stretching out the soft material. If I didn't, she'd know exactly what I was thinking in five seconds flat. "It's nice to meet you, Avery."

She blushes, and I watch as she trembles. The snow is falling behind her, and I step aside. "Come in. It's too cold to be out here."

She hesitates for just a minute until she walks in, and I follow behind her. I slam into the back of her when she stops suddenly. The force of my body against hers has her grabbing the pink box before it hits the floor and me grabbing her before she does.

My arms are around her waist and my hands flattened to her stomach as I pull her up flush against the front of my body. The erection I was trying to hide from her only moments ago

has completely come to life now as she giggles again. I'm pretty sure I'm going to hell because I hold her to me firmly, committing to memory the feel of her against me before I set her on her two feet and force myself to put distance between us. I look over her shoulder and spot what has her stopping. "Bull, move so we can come in."

Bull opens his mouth wide in a big yawn and stares up at us without moving. I step around Avery, but before I can get to Bull, Avery's dropping to her knees, setting the box on the ground next to her. "You surprised me, didn't you, buddy? Well, I didn't forget you." She pulls a bone-shaped cookie from the pocket of her dress and holds it up to me. "It's an all-natural doggie treat. Can Bull have it?"

I nod, not wanting to disappoint her. My dog is not going to eat anything all natural. He's pretty picky when it comes to his food. I watch as she holds the treat out to Bull. He sniffs it and jerks it from Avery's hand, devouring it in one bite. He chews it up, and before I can stop him, he's bounding on top of Avery, licking her cheek and knocking her backwards onto the floor.

"Bull, no!" I say, reaching for the dog.

Avery's laughing, rolling on the floor as Bull stands over her, licking her face, and the more Avery squirms, the more Bull thinks it's a game. I'm about to grab my dog when I notice in all of the twisting and turning, Avery's dress has ridden up her thighs and I have a perfect view of her pink panties fitted to her cunt. Fuck me, this has to be a test.

I avert my eyes and grab the dog, walking with him into the kitchen. I need a breather and to put a little space between me and the new neighbor. "I'm going to give him his food. I'll be right back."

I set the dog down in the kitchen and fill his bowl up with food. Instead of devouring it like normal, he sticks his nose up in the air and turns to walk back toward the other room. "Oh no you don't, Bull. You're staying in here." I set him down at his bowl again. "Now, stay. I'll be back."

I adjust myself, take a few calming breaths and then walk back out to where I left Avery. She's standing now, her pretty pink panties hidden, and she's holding her little pink box, innocently smiling at me with her big, green eyes. As if she didn't just sucker punch me in the gut. "Sorry about that. He loved the treat you gave him."

"Oh good. And these are for you," she says, holding out the box to me.

I take it and open it up. The smell of sugar and sweetness hits my nose in an instant, and I reach into the box. There's an assortment of cupcakes, all perfectly decorated. I pick up the snowman and take a bite. The sweet taste melts on my tongue, and before I realize it I've inhaled the whole cupcake. "Uh, wow, that is good. Did you make it?"

Her face brightens at the compliment, and I pick up a Santa cupcake and eat a bite of it, determined to take it slower this time. "Wow, these are really good. Do you want to have a seat? I don't know where my manners are. Obviously, Bull and I don't get a lot of guests over."

"I'll have to bring my Muff over."

My eyes widen, and I start to choke on the piece of cupcake that I couldn't resist. "Your muff?" I ask, between coughs.

She nods innocently. My mind is in the complete gutter, and she tilts her head. "Yeah, my kitty's name is Muff. Bull will love her."

I don't want to disappoint her because Bull doesn't get along well with other dogs, and he's definitely not going to play nice with a cat. I'm working it out in my head, trying to figure out how to get her back over here. I may have to threaten the dog, but if getting her to bring Muff over here is going to be my excuse, I'll make it happen.

"Uh, are you okay? Do you need water or something?"

I need something all right. Her... on my lap and her lips on mine. I'm shaking my head, though. "No, I'm fine. Thank you for these. I'll probably eat them all tonight."

She rocks back and forth on her feet. “That’s all right. I bake all the time. I’m happy to share.”

My smile freezes on my face. Share. I definitely won’t be sharing her. As a matter of fact, I’ll probably pluck the eyes out of any asshole that looks at her.

She’s moving, and I must have gotten lost in thought because she’s walking to the door. “Where are you going?” I ask her.

She looks at me over her shoulder with a laugh on her lips. “Home. I know you just got home from work, and you have to be tired. I just wanted to say hi and bring you and your doggie some treats.”

I set the box down on the entry table. “I’ll walk you home.”

She steps onto the porch and pulls her sweater closer around her. “You don’t have to.”

With my hand on her back, I guide her down the steps and across the driveway. “I want to.” And right then, I knew that I’m going to be seeing a lot more of Avery.

Chapter 2

Avery

I walk into my apartment, and the first thing I do is pull off my sweater. It's forty degrees outside, but I'm burning up. Have mercy. I've watched Lincoln come and go since I moved in two weeks ago, but far away Lincoln is nothing compared to up close Lincoln.

It took me that long to work up the nerve to go and say hi to him. Finally, I convinced myself that I really should introduce myself to the neighbors. And that's how I ended up making six dozen Christmas cupcakes and a whole batch of doggie treats... all so I could meet Lincoln.

Muff jumps from her perch in the window and threads her furry body along my ankles. I pick her up. "Look, Muff, I know you don't have a lot of experience with dogs, but I checked Bull out, and you're just going to have to be nice to him."

She meows, and I rub my chin along the soft fur between her ears. "I know he's big, but he's a sweetie."

She purrs in my arms, and I walk with her through the apartment to the bedroom. Settling down on the bed, she curls into a ball, and I go to the bathroom to strip off my clothes and take a shower. I have more cupcakes to deliver tomorrow with it being Christmas Eve and all.

I shower quickly, and the whole time my thoughts remain on Lincoln. I wrap my body in a towel and walk back into my bedroom, drying off on the way and tossing the towel into the

hamper. I'm about to grab a nightshirt from the dresser when I spot myself in the full-length mirror and stop.

I hate seeing myself like this. I stare at myself in the mirror, taking in the curves and all the imperfections. My hands go to my hips, and I can pinch more than an inch there. I stroke along my belly, looking at the soft lines I have there from the yo-yo dieting I did when I was younger. And then my hands come up to my breasts. I cup each of them, feeling the weight in my hands. Men supposedly like large breasts, but I'm sure mine should be perkier than they are. I turn to the side, looking at the roundness of my waist.

There's no way Lincoln would be into me. I'm not sure what I was thinking, taking cupcakes over to him. What did I think? He was going to take one look at me, eat one of my cupcakes and be smitten? Right!

I sigh and finally my eyes find my face in the mirror. I'm about to look away when a sudden movement in it has me spinning around.

I look out the window, across the lawn to Lincoln's house next door. He's standing in the window across from me, drapes open wide. The whole two weeks I've been here, those curtains have never been opened, and then tonight, of all nights, he's standing there watching me. I gasp, frozen.

I should scream. I should cover myself, turn off the light, or do something, but I can't. I'm frozen to the spot... and that's when I see it.

He's stroking himself. His cock is long and hard. His pants are around his thighs as he grips himself and is moving his hand from the root of his manhood all the way to the tip and then back again.

I'm watching him while he's watching me. I can feel my whole body heat and between my thighs get slick. This shouldn't be turning me on, right? I shouldn't be enjoying this.

His face scrunches, and in one quick movement, he lets go, pulls his shirt off, drops it to the floor, and then goes back to jerking himself.

His lean chest and firm abs are all flexed and hard looking.

I'm still standing here, completely naked, my hands down at my sides. I should close the blinds... but I don't.

His movements quicken, and his hips start to move. I can't look away. I just can't.

His hips are bucking, his forearms flexing with every movement, and his jaw is pulled tight in concentration. But the whole time, his eyes are on mine. Even from here, I can feel the hot path of his gaze on my body. The insecurity and feelings from before are long gone because there's no doubt right now that Lincoln is attracted to me. He's hard, and he's jacking himself off to watching me.

I wait for him to finish, ready to see the cum spurt from his tip. In anticipation, I slide my hands up my hips, across my stomach and then knead my breasts. I roll the hard tips of my nipples between my fingers. It feels so good. I moan and almost close my eyes in ecstasy before I pop them open, not wanting to miss his grand finale.

He's eating it up. He's moved closer to the window, not caring who's watching at this point. Anyone walking on the lower sidewalk could probably see him, but he's not thinking about that because right now, all he's thinking about is me.

He puts one hand on the glass as he strokes himself with the other. He's close. Damn, he's so close. His hips jerk uncontrollably, and before I know it, there's streams of cum shooting from him, falling to the floor. The orgasm hits him hard, and his eyes clench closed. I watch as his dick twitches in his hand, wishing I was across the lawn in his bedroom with him.

Before he opens his eyes, I have the lights turned off and the curtains drawn. My cheeks, hell my whole body is flushed, thinking about what I just let him do. Every part of me is tingling, and there's a low tug in my belly. My breath is coming in pants, and I'm looking around the dark room in a panic. I don't grab a nightshirt or panties.

I climb into the bed, moving Muff to the side before I slide under the covers. I lie there, still not believing that what just happened really happened. My hand trails down my belly and between my thighs. I'm soaked, and my clit is swollen. I'm aroused just watching Lincoln get off. I can just imagine how good it would feel with his hands on me, pleasing me. I may have never done that before, but I know with Lincoln, it would be good. I lie as still as I possibly can in the bed. I don't know what I'm waiting for, but a part of me is hoping that Lincoln is going to be knocking on my door soon.

Chapter 3

Lincoln

After I cleaned up last night, I found myself standing in the driveway, debating with myself what to do. I wanted to go see her. I wanted to finish what I started, but a part of me was waiting for her to scream or for the sirens of the police to come and cart me off.

So instead, I went back into the house and thought of her all night long. Before the sun even came up, I was out of bed, pacing back and forth in the bedroom, watching for any movement next door.

Around midmorning, I'm on my porch talking on the phone to one of my buddies, and my eyes keep darting to the stairs of the garage next door. "Did you talk Emery into going with you tonight?"

"No," I answer just as Avery opens her door. She's carrying a bag of trash down the steps, and I meet her at the bottom. She's watching me, and I don't know if it's the cold air or if she's embarrassed is why her face is red.

Barry keeps talking, and I hold my free hand out to Avery. "Here, I'll take it."

She shakes her head. "I can get it."

Not as long as I'm here you won't. I don't move, and she can't get around me. "Here," I say again.

She huffs and hands the bag over. "Look, Barry, I've got to go. I'll figure out tonight one way or another. Merry Christmas, man."

I listen to Barry say goodbye before I pocket the phone and walk the trash to the can around the side of the house. I look back, and Avery's following me. "You okay?" she asks.

I shrug. I'm not okay, really. But I'm better now that she's where I can see her. I put the trash in the can and turn back to her. "I'm okay."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "You seem upset."

"You really wanna know?"

She nods.

"Okay, well, I have to go to a client's house for dinner tonight."

"You have to work on Christmas Eve?"

I shrug. I've never minded working on Christmas Eve, but I do tonight. I can think of something else I'd much prefer doing right now. "I'm a real estate developer, and he's a big client, and when he found out I didn't have plans for tonight, he invited me for his family dinner party."

She smiles, and I swear it about takes my breath away. "Well, that's nice of him."

I nod. "Yeah, well, he's a great guy. But his wife, well, she's a little handsy, if you know what I mean. Let's just say I let her think I was married to ward her off."

Avery's stance shifts, and she averts her eyes. "Did it work?"

I put my hand on her back and guide her toward my porch. "No, not like I'd hoped. I think now it's like a challenge for her."

"Just tell her no." Her voice is heated, and she's shaking her head in disgust.

I grab on to her hand and thread our fingers together. I wait for her to pull away, and when she doesn't, I shoot my shot. "You want to come play my wife?"

She blinks up at me. "Tonight?"

My hand tightens on hers. “You probably have plans.”

She’s shaking her head. “No, but I don’t really have anything to wear.”

“I can take you shopping.”

She starts to laugh. “You want to go shopping on Christmas Eve? Do you know how busy the stores will be?”

I pull her to me and breathe in her soft, sugary scent. I’d do anything right now if it meant I could spend more time with her. Even if it means spending time in a packed department store. “I don’t care. It could be fun.”

She scrunches her nose up, looks down at herself, and then back up at me. “Are you sure you want to go... with me?”

My other hand goes to her waist, and I grip on to her there. Her body trembles against mine, and there’s a satisfaction in knowing that her body reacts like it does to me. “Do I want to go to a Christmas Eve party with my hot next-door neighbor playing as my wife?” I release her waist and put my hand under her chin to bring her face up, forcing her to look into my eyes. “That means we’ll have to hold hands... probably kiss... act like we like each other.” I lick my lips. Fuck, it even sounds good just saying it. “Yeah, Avery honey, I’m sure I want you to go with me.”

She bites on to her lower lip, and I can tell she’s weighing her options. She wants to say yes. She’s leaning into me, her hard nipples pressed against her shirt. I release her chin and leave my hand at her neck, my finger grazing across her pulse point. I stay silent, hoping and praying she’s going to say yes.

“I can find something to wear in my closet.”

I release her neck, and with her hand in mine, I walk with her across the driveway to her house. I take the stairs, slower than normal just so I can hold her hand on the way up. When we get to the top, she’s speechless, looking at me, unsure. “What time should I be ready?”

“Ten minutes. I’ve got to let Bull out before we go.”

“Uh, I need more than ten minutes to find something to wear.”

I kiss her forehead because I can no longer resist her. She’s so sweet, innocent and just unsure about things it’s killing me. Somehow she doesn’t realize how beautiful and tempting she is. I’m going to show her though. “No, you have ten minutes before we go to the mall to go shopping.”

Instead of pulling back, she leans her head against my chest. “I can go by myself.”

I know she can probably feel the erratic beating of my heart. I feel like I’m on a roller coaster right now. “Nope. I’m going with you. Plus, we need to practice.”

She lifts her head then. “Practice?”

I nod, staring down at her perfect pink bow lips that are just so kissable looking. “Yeah, practice being husband and wife. We’re probably going to need to know a little something about each other.”

“Husband,” she whispers.

And I fuckin’ smile at her until my cheeks hurt. Husband on her lips just sounds right. I wait for the heaviness to hit me in the chest. I’ve never once thought about settling down before, but the thought of it with her doesn’t having me freaking out like it probably should. “Yeah, baby.” I stroke my finger on her cheek. “We may even have to kiss a little. You know, to practice for tonight.”

She gasps, and I shake my head. She’s way too tempting. “Nine minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll be ready.”

I release her because if I don’t, I know I’m going to be following her inside. She turns to go, and I stop her as she walks in. “Avery?”

“Yeah?” She turns with her hand on the open door.

“I owe you an apology.”

She looks confused, but then realization hits her, and she flushes, letting me know she's remembering last night. "No, it's okay..."

I shrug. "It's not, though. I was just going to talk to you across the driveway. I thought it'd be cute, I was going to flirt with you a little, but I never dreamed you would be naked. I shouldn't have watched... I should have shut the curtains, but I couldn't do it. There's no way I would have been able to stop looking at you."

She swallows and nods her head. I wonder what's going through her mind, but when she doesn't say anything, I say it again. "I'm sorry."

She nods and walks into the apartment, and I'm about to leave when her words stop me. "I'm not sorry."

It's so quick... and then the door shuts, leaving me wondering if I did in fact hear what I thought I heard. But then I think of her touching herself last night and the satisfaction I saw on her face. She liked it... and I'm going to make sure she gets her release tonight.

Chapter 4

Avery

“I think your girlfriend is looking for you,” Lincoln says to the man that is standing next to me.

“Lincoln!” I exclaim, caught off guard by his rudeness.

He positions himself between me and the stranger until the other man walks away. He then comes to stand in front of me, reaches for my hand, and puts a ring on my finger. “Here. I should have put this on you before we left the house.”

His voice is gruff, and for a second, I’m speechless. The large diamond ring fits my finger perfectly. I look up into his pinched face. “Are you mad about it? You can give it to me later before the party.”

His hands go to my waist, and he squeezes me almost possessively. “You don’t have a clue, do you?”

I try to step back, but he just holds me tighter. What do I not have a clue about? I’m already embarrassed that I’ve had to go to three different stores just to find my size of clothing. I can feel my face heat under his scrutiny. “I’m a big girl, Lincoln. I can’t help it if stores don’t carry clothes that fit me.”

He lifts his chin. “Fuck them. You could wear a fuckin’ sheet and be stunning. I’m talking about you. You don’t have a clue about how beautiful you are—”

I shake my head, interrupting him. “I’m not bea—”

“You are.” His hands go to my hips, and I almost forget to breathe. “I’ve almost had to pluck a guy’s eyeballs out for

staring at you. Everywhere we go, they're watching. Is it like this all the time?"

I shake my head in confusion. "What are you even talking about?"

He bends down until we're almost nose to nose. "I'm talking about men hitting on you, following you, and staring at you. Is it always like this?"

I'm speechless. He must see the clueless look on my face, and his eyebrows jump. "Oh my God, you really have no idea."

I put my hand on his chest to shove him. He's obviously joking with me. "Whatever, Lincoln."

He grabs on to my hand and holds it to his chest. "It's true, Avery. You're a fuckin' angel. That beautiful face, that smile that makes a person feel like they're the only damn person in the world, that body that any man would kill to be over, under, or in. Yeah, baby. You! You're beautiful."

He's taking deep breaths, and his heart feels like he just ran a race as it thumps under my palm. What I thought was a joke obviously isn't. There's no way I can doubt anything he's saying right now with the way he's staring at me. It's as if he's daring me to disagree. A part of me wants to, but another part of me wonders if he's determined to show me he's for real, and am I ready for it? I'm no match for this older, more experienced man. "Uh..."

He takes three deep breaths, and I can physically see him putting his guard up and distance between us.

"Clothes," he says.

I blink in confusion. "Huh?"

He drops his hand from my waist and steps back. "Clothes. We're here for a dress. Let's do that and get the hell out of here."

I nod and avert my eyes. I want to ask him more. He seems on edge, and even though I haven't known him long, he doesn't seem the type that lets much bother him. "Okay."

I walk away, across the store to the dresses. I grab a few off the rack and head straight back to the dressing room. As I'm going, I notice the man from earlier. He's standing next to a woman but he's not paying attention to her. He's watching me. Instead of smiling like I normally would, I keep going and don't stop until I'm behind the closed door of the dressing room.

I look in the mirror, trying to see what Lincoln says he sees in me, but I don't. It's still just me, plain Avery with the mousy brown hair and the plus size figure. I blow out a breath and start to undress. I don't know how I'm going to pull this off tonight, but I've already committed, and there's no way I can back out now. Plus, just the thought of his friend's wife hitting on him has my stomach rolling over.

I get down to my panties and bra and pull the first dress off the hanger. It's a fitted blue dress, and as soon as I pull it on, I'm pulling it off. The wrap style is definitely not for my body type. I hang the dress up and am pulling down the next one when Lincoln's deep voice comes through the door. "I wanna see."

I don't know if it's his deep throaty voice or knowing that I'm almost naked and he's right outside the door, but I have a full body tremble. "Okay," I squeak and then clear my throat. "I'll show you the next one."

I pull the red dress off the hanger and slide it over my head. The sweetheart neckline is a little low, but the flair of the skirt is at least flattering. I try to zip it, but I can't get it all the way up.

"Avery," Lincoln says.

I pull my shoulders back and open the dressing room door. "I can't zip it up."

His gaze travels down my body and back up again. When his eyes meet mine, his eyes are a darker shade of blue, and the desire I see there I'm sure is reflected in mine. He pushes himself into the dressing room and shuts the door behind him. "It's perfect."

Instead of answering him, I turn around and face the mirror. I watch as he looks at my back, and the heat of his sigh hits my neck. He looks up at my face in the mirror, and I don't dare move. The small room feels ten times smaller with him here behind me. "I uh, I'm not sure if it will fit. Can you zip it up?"

He swallows and looks at my back. His knuckles stroke up and down my bare skin. I can't stop the gasp before it leaves my lips. I lean forward and put one hand on the mirror to keep myself from falling over. One touch is all it takes. I clench my eyes and shiver. His rough fingers go up and down my back, and my head falls forward. His other hand comes around my waist and fans out on my stomach, holding me up. The movement puts him closer to me, and my lower body is fitted against his pelvis. He rotates his hips, and the hardness of his erection digs into my bottom.

"Avery," he says, but I can't look at him. The way my body is reacting to him is too much and like nothing I've ever felt before.

His hand moves from my back up between my shoulder blades and then around the base of my neck. He lifts my chin up so that I'm staring at him in the mirror. Looking at the two of us, he's a big man, and I look almost small and tiny next to him. "Yeah, Lincoln?"

"Let's skip the party."

I blink, and before I can stop myself, I blurt out, "You don't want to go with me?"

"Fuck," he grunts. He leans closer, burying his nose into my neck, and inhales deeply. He turns me in his arms, locks his hands on my lower back, and pulls me in, fitted against his hard body. "Yeah, we'll go. I want to go with you, but I'm warning you right now, Avery, I'm not some pushover who will just sit back if some motherfucker flirts with you. I don't share. And I definitely won't be sharing you."

He looks so serious, but I can't hold it back. I laugh, throwing my head back. I don't even know what he's

thinking... Men don't flirt with me. "I don't think you have anything to worry about there, Lincoln."

I stop laughing when I see he's not laughing with me.

"I want to kiss you."

My hands go to his chest. "Right here? Right now?" I ask. There's no way I'm anywhere even close to being prepared for this. I don't have a clue what I'm doing. Will he be able to tell? I gulp, knowing that I won't say no to him. "Okay."

His hands go straight to my face, and he cups my cheeks, holding my face up to his. He leans down, his lips briefly touching mine before he pulls back, eyes wide, and stares at me. Speechless, I can only watch him, not knowing what I should be doing here. He leans in again and feathers his lips over mine before pulling my lower lip in between his. I gasp, giving him access, and he takes full advantage, sweeping his tongue into my mouth. My hands go up his chest and around his neck. He picks me up, my feet dangling before I lift my legs and wrap them around his waist.

His hips buck against mine, and I moan so loudly, I'm sure the whole store hears it. He pulls his lips off mine, and I bury my head under his chin. Oh my goodness, what a kiss!

Knock, knock. "Yoo hoo! Hello in there. Do you need any help?"

I can't even mutter a word. I feel as if I'm about to pass out, but I'm holding my breath, and I let it out in one big swoosh.

"No. We're fine. Don't open that door," Lincoln answers, and even I can hear the threat in his voice. I'd be willing to bet the woman on the other side won't even think about it.

Lincoln lets me down, my body sliding against his until my feet are on the floor. He reaches around me and pulls the zipper up my dress and turns me around. His hands go to my hips, and he's staring at me in the mirror. "It's perfect. Take it off and I'll buy it."

"I can buy my own dress," I tell him. Even though it may cut into my savings and all, I don't want him to have to buy

my clothes.

He shakes his head and reaches around me to unzip the dress again. "I'm buying it."

I sigh. I'm not going to argue with him. "Wait for me outside, and I'll hand the dress over."

He's going to disagree with me. He opens his mouth, but he must change his mind because he slams it shut. He reaches for the doorknob and before he goes out, he gives me a longing look over his shoulder. "I have a feeling this is going to be the best Christmas ever."

Chapter 5

Lincoln

*Y*ou have to go to the party.

I've told myself that over and over ever since I picked her up. She looks all beautiful, and the skirt of her dress has ridden up, showing an expanse of thigh at the top of her stockings that I just want to grip on to.

"You okay?" she asks.

I grunt my answer, because the throb of my hard cock has been driving me crazy since earlier in the dressing room.

She turns as much as she can, lifting her leg into the seat. *More thigh. Fuck.*

"So we should probably know a few things about each other since we're supposed to be married and all."

I nod, looking at her thigh and the ring on her finger that she's staring at again. "Right. Uh, I have three brothers. One in New York, one in California, and one in Hawaii. Our parents are deceased. It's almost impossible for all of us to get together for Christmas so we celebrated a few weeks ago."

She nods. "I'm sorry about your parents. Mine retired to Florida. I recently lost my job, an ex-boyfriend stole my money, and that's how I ended up over my aunt and uncle's garage."

I grip the steering wheel. "Someone stole from you?" I'll kill them.

She just shrugs like it's not a big deal. "Yeah, but we probably don't want to mention the ex-boyfriend."

I shift in my seat. She's right about that. I don't want to think about her dating anyone else. "And you like to make cupcakes. Is that what you do?"

She nods. "Yeah, back in Knoxville I had quite a few restaurants I delivered to, but I haven't set up anything in Whiskey Run yet."

"I'll be your first customer. I'll take four dozen every Monday."

Her hand goes to her heart. "Four dozen? Lincoln, you don't have to..."

I'm already shaking my head. "I want to... and if it means I get to see you and eat your cupcakes, well, I want in. My employees will at least have something to look forward to at our Monday meetings now."

She reaches across and squeezes my arm, letting me know how much it truly means to her. "Thank you, Lincoln. I mean it, really. Thank you."

I shrug my shoulders and at the same time turn my arm over and take her hand. Hers is so much smaller than mine, but I still thread our fingers together and hold them on my thigh. "Don't thank me. You're helping me out."

"So tell me about your job. What exactly do you do?"

"I buy properties. Sometimes by myself and sometimes with partners and then I plan for what to build there."

"And that's how you met...sorry, what's his name?"

"Tom Sizemore. He just invested three million dollars into a project in Jasper. I found the land for him and am planning the construction and everything for him."

Her eyes are wide. "Three million dollars?" She starts to fidget. "Look, Lincoln, I don't know about this. It's probably a bad idea. He's rich, and I know you want to make a good impression... I don't want to screw this up for you." She turns in her seat and tries to pull her hand away. "Just pull over here, and you can make an excuse why I couldn't come."

“I’m not going without you,” I tell her, holding on to her hand even tighter. She’s so damn cute, thinking that I’d pick anyone else over her. At this point, there’s only her.

She takes a deep breath. “Are you sure about this?”

I bring her hand up and kiss the back of it. “Yes, I’m sure.”

When we get to Jasper, I pull into the long, winding driveway and up to the valet. This was supposed to be a family dinner, but it looks as if it’s something bigger than that. I wave off the valet from opening Avery’s door and help her out of the car. She’s holding a large pink box filled with her cupcakes. “Should I leave the cupcakes?”

I take the box from her. “As much as I’d like to say yes so that I get to keep them all to myself, no, you should take them in. It will be good for your business to get the word out.”

She nods self-consciously.

I put an arm around her waist and walk with her inside. There are three Christmas trees all elegantly decorated in the huge open room. There are Christmas lights, and everyone is drinking and having a merry time. Just like I knew it would be, every man’s head turns toward her. I pull her in even tighter and growl under my breath. She turns facing me, patting her hand to my chest. She’s smiling up at me, and for the first time, I think she’s realizing the power she has over me. “It’s okay, Linc. I’m going home with you.”

As soon as the words are out, she turns a deep shade of red. “I mean... I don’t mean home with you... I mean.”

I shake my head, pressing my hand to the small of her back and pulling her body flush against mine. “You’re right, Avery. You’ll be going home with me if you want to.”

I hold my breath, waiting for her answer. She nods and blinks up at me. “I’d like to.”

I’m just about to take her out the door we just came in when Mr. and Mrs. Sizemore come up to us. “Lincoln, you made it.”

I wrap my arm around Avery and hold the box in front of me. “Yes, thank you so much for inviting us. Tom, Julie, this is my wife, Avery. Avery, this is Tom and Julie.”

Avery smiles, shaking both their hands. “Your home is just beautiful. Thank you so much for inviting us tonight.”

Julie is looking at Avery with a snobby look on her face, and a part of me wishes that I hadn’t put her in this situation. I know how some women can be, and I would not want Julie to think she can mess with Avery. I won’t let it happen.

I hold the box up. “And this is from Avery. She’s a baker, and she whipped up some of her cupcakes for tonight.”

Tom opens the box, and Julie gasps. “Oh my, they’re beautiful. Almost too pretty to eat.”

Tom nods, but still picks up a cupcake and takes a big bite. “Oh my, that is good.” He looks at my wife—I mean Avery—who smiles ear to ear. “You will have to make sure you leave your card. We are always having parties and celebrations. We will definitely be hiring you in the future.”

Avery is shocked, but she recovers quickly. She’s nodding and reaches into her purse and hands over a business card. “Thank you so much.”

The Sizemores take the cupcakes and as soon as they walk away, Avery is jumping up and down excitedly. “Linc, did you see that? Oh my gosh, I can just kiss you.”

I’m smiling, excited for her until she says the word kiss. My thoughts go molten, and before I can stop myself, I’m pulling her through the house, down a long hallway and the first door that’s open, I step inside and shut the door behind us.

“Lincoln?” she asks breathily as I lean her against the closed door.

“Yeah, honey?”

She’s smiling still. “Uh, what are you doing?”

I twirl a piece of her hair around my finger. “I’m about to be kissing my wife.”

Her hands go to my chest. “I thought we were convincing them we were married. There’s only us in here.”

My hands go to her waist. “When I’m done with you, there’s no doubt that every man out there is going to know you’re mine.”

Her breath hitches, and she bites her lower lip. “Okay.”

I kiss her, ravaging her lips. She’s all I’ve thought about and that kiss in the dressing room earlier was not nearly enough to satisfy me. Every second, every glance, every kiss she gives me... I want more.

Our panting breaths fill the room, and it’s not enough. “I want to touch you.”

She leans her head back against the door with a thud. “Okay.”

My hand goes to the hem of her skirt, and I bring it up to the edge of her stockings. Her skin is soft, and I stroke my finger back and forth. Her body comes alive and bucks against my hand. “You like that?”

She nods, and I move higher until the pad of my thumb is covering the wet center of her panties. “Oh God,” she moans.

I run my tongue up her neck to her ear as I move my thumb in a circle against her damp panties. “You’re so wet, Avery. Have you been thinking about this all day? Have you been aching, baby, wanting me to touch you like this?”

She lifts her hips, and I know what she wants. I slide her panties to the side, and as soon as my fingers touch her smooth, velvety lips I know nothing in my life will compare to this right here. “Awww...”she groans as I slide my fingers through her wet, swollen slit.

“Talk to me, Avery. Tell me what you want.”

Her eyes open, and she stares up at me. She’s dazed and so close to coming it’s crazy to think one touch makes her this far gone. “I don’t know.”

I kiss her cheek and then her lips before I pull back. “Anything you want... you can have it. Just tell me.”

Her body tenses. “I don’t know.... I mean, I really don’t know. I’ve never done this. No one’s ever touched me... like this.”

My heart stops, and my hand jerks to a halt. She reaches her arms out and wraps them around my forearm, holding me in place. “No, don’t stop. I can learn... You can show me.”

But I don’t move. I’m burning up for her. How can she be a virgin?

“I promise, I’m a fast learner. You can show me how to please you.”

I blow out a breath as if the air was knocked out of me, but I recover quickly. She’s worried about pleasing me. Does she not know? “You want to please me?”

She nods, and I start moving my fingers again. “If you want to please me, then I need you to come on my fingers.”

She moans, relaxing her hold on my arm as her legs tighten on my hand. “That’s it, baby. You want this, don’t you? I do too. Come on my fingers and then I’m going to lick it off.”

Another groan and she starts to push me away and then pulls me in closer. Her right leg comes up, and she hooks it on my hip. Fuck, she may be new to this, but my girl knows.

“Then when we get home later, I’m going to lay you back on the middle of my bed and I’m going to eat your pussy. I won’t stop until I’m sure that you’re completely satisfied, and I know that when you want to get off, when you want to feel good, you’re going to come to me and only me.”

“Arrrrr!” she bellows, and I cover her mouth with my own.

I circle her clit, increasing the pressure until her hips are gyrating, knocking against the door. My tongue is mimicking the in and out motion, and her whole body tautens as she orgasms. She’s coming, and her body is shaking uncontrollably. Fuck this, I can’t wait.

I drop to my knees and put my head under her skirt. I suck on her swollen clit until she’s coming again, over and over,

and I'm licking up all her sweet cream. She tastes sweeter than even the sugar-filled Christmas cupcakes I had earlier.

I raise up, holding on to her so she doesn't fall. I press my lips to hers, wanting her to taste herself. As soon as the flavor hits her tongue, she's moaning again. I have to stop. I have to because if I don't, I'm going to take her virginity right here, and the whole damn house will be in for a hell of a surprise because when my woman comes, she comes loud. And I plan on making her come... a lot.

Chapter 6

Avery

Everyone knows. At least it feels like they do. I know it's obvious what I've been doing. I'm looking in the mirror, having every intention to clean myself up, but I can't stop staring at myself in the reflection. My lips are swollen, and my eyes are hooded and two shades darker. My nipples are so hard, they're pressing against the front of my dress, and no matter what I try—counting backwards, thinking of something horrible, whatever—nothing works.

And it's just my luck that Julie walks into the bathroom as I'm standing here. I put my head down and start washing my hands. Man, why didn't I lock the door?

"Avery, are you enjoying the party?"

Before I can answer, she continues. "Of course you are. You have the handsomest and the richest husband here. I wonder if you know how lucky you are exactly."

I dry off my hands and hold up my ring finger. "Yes, I know exactly how lucky I am."

She puts her hand on her hip. "It's funny. I've asked around, and no one even knew you existed. I know most everyone here is from Jasper, but a few have businesses in Whiskey Run and they know Lincoln. They were surprised when I said he was married."

I keep the smile firmly planted on my face. I'm a horrible liar, but I can't mess this up for him. "Well, it's all sort of new, and it all kind of happened suddenly." I start to ramble and press my lips together. *Less is more, Avery.*

Her thick eyebrows draw together, and I know she doesn't believe me. I wipe my hands on one of the towels and then walk briskly to the door. "Well, I better go, Linc is waiting for me."

I don't wait for her response. I get out the door, and Linc straightens from leaning on the wall. "Good. I was about to come in when I saw her come in after you."

I look down the hallway and up at Lincoln. "No one believes we're married. This wasn't a very good idea. Maybe we should go."

I start to walk away, but he grabs on to my hand and holds me in place. His hands go to my hips, and he leans down, resting his chin on my shoulder. "We're not leaving. I want to sit down and have dinner with you and then I hear there's going to be dancing. I'm definitely not going until I at least have one dance."

I turn worriedly. "Linc, I'm a horrible liar and I don't want to mess this up for you."

"You won't mess up anything. No one here matters. Only me and you." He leans down and kisses me just as Julie comes out of the ladies' room. I pull apart quickly, but Lincoln doesn't let me go far. He nods at Julie but then focuses completely on me. "Relax. We're going to have some fun."

He wraps my hand in his, and we walk back to the main room. Everyone is sitting down to eat, and Tom has put us at the table with him, Julie, and two of Tom's brothers. Everyone is talking and having a good time. One of Tom's brothers owns a restaurant in Jasper, and he's asking about my cupcakes, so I tell him about the cupcake program that I did with restaurants back in Knoxville. And even though Lincoln has his hand on my thigh the whole time, he's encouraging the conversation, even offering to take me into Jasper next week to bring some cupcakes to test.

The Sizemores serve a complete meal of ham, mashed potatoes, corn, green beans, and rolls slathered in butter, and when it comes time for dessert, I have to pass. The food was so good.

“Try it,” Linc says, holding out a piece of cake on his fork.

I laugh and put my hand over my stomach. “I’m so full.”

He nods and leans forward. “This is from Red’s Diner in Whiskey Run. It’s famous for its cinnamon apple Blaze cake.”

I laugh. “Famous? Well, I can’t necessarily turn down famous cake.”

He puts the sliver of cake to my lips, and I eat it in one bite. I moan as the cinnamon, apples, and brown sugar hit my tastebuds. “Mmmmm.”

Linc smiles and he almost looks predatory as he stares back at me. He sets the fork down and scoots his chair back, holding his hand out to me as he stands up. “Dance with me?”

I look at the place in the middle of the room where they’ve set up a small dance floor. “No one’s dancing,” I tell him.

“I don’t care. I want to hold you in my arms.”

I rise up and put my hand in his. “I can’t very well say no when you ask like that.”

He goes to the center of the dance floor and then pulls me into his arms. “Thank you for coming with me tonight.”

I slide my hands up his chest to his shoulders. “I should be thanking you. I won’t starve this month since you’ve helped me get some business.”

“I wouldn’t let you starve.”

I lean in and rest my head on his chest. This feels so good. It just feels right. I need to remind myself that it’s not real. None of it is.

“I never did ask you where you got the wedding rings.”

I can feel his body tense, but it’s too late to take it back. Obviously, it’s not something he wants to talk about. “They were my parents’. When they passed, since I’m the oldest, I got their rings.”

I clench my eyes shut. “I’m so sorry, Lincoln. I shouldn’t have asked.”

He moves his hands from my waist to around my shoulders until it's more like we're hugging instead of dancing. "You can ask me anything, Avery. Anything at all."

I lean my head back and rest my chin on his chest. "Okay, how old are you?"

"I'm thirty-five. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

I wait to see if that bothers him, but he doesn't hesitate. He just asks the next question. "So how come you are not with your parents or aunt and uncle for Christmas?"

I tilt my head to the side and lean my head against his chest. "My parents and I are not close. My brother passed away when I was younger, and we just never got over it. Sometimes it's easier to just be apart, if that makes any sense. And my aunt and uncle are with their kids in Texas for the holidays."

He tightens his hold on me. "I'm sorry about your brother."

I nod and clench my eyes shut. We sway back and forth, and my hands move under his jacket and around to his back. I stroke up and down the thin material of his shirt, lost in thought.

"Avery, baby," Linc says in a strangled voice.

"Yeah," I answer him softly. Other couples are now on the dance floor, and we're no longer the only ones.

"You may not want to do that."

Confused, I look up at him. "Do what?"

He leans down and places a feathery kiss on the tip of my nose. "Touch me like that."

I don't stop. I press my nails into his back and move them up and down. "What, that?"

He moans low in my ear. "Yeah, that."

I smile as his heart races under my cheek. “Why? It sounds like you might be enjoying it.”

It feels good to tease him, and I press my fingers harder into his back with big strokes.

His hands go to my hips, and he pulls me flush against him. “That’s why. Do you feel that? I’ve been fighting that hard-on since I came in my hand last night watching you in the window. I’m trying to be a gentleman, Avery. But having you in my arms like this, touching me, well, I’m about to throw all my good intentions out the window.”

I still can’t believe it. Me, the curvy, plump girl that can barely talk to guys seems to have this one hook, line and sinker. His manhood is hard, digging into my hip, but I don’t try to move back. No, I push my hips farther against his. “Do you think you can take me home, Lincoln?”

He stops moving his feet and looks at me questioningly. “To my house?”

Please, let me be making the right decision. “I’d like to go to your house.”

He leans down and kisses me before turning me around, and he guides me toward the front door. He doesn’t even stop and say anything to the Sizemores; he merely waves at them and calls *Thank you* and *Merry Christmas* across the room as we go.

As soon as we get outside, I tremble in the night air. I didn’t wear a sweater or jacket because nothing I had went with the dress. Before I get down the front steps, Lincoln has his jacket off and is putting it over my shoulders. I bundle into its warmth and inhale the smell of him. “Thank you.”

The valet gets the car, and we’re in it, driving toward Whiskey Run before I even have a chance to second-guess myself.

When we’re on the stretch of highway, Lincoln points at the glovebox. “Open that.”

I do as he asks, and there’s a small box, wrapped in Christmas paper. I pull it out and look at the label that says

Avery. “Lincoln, is this for me? How? I mean when?”

“I saw them at the mall today and knew they were perfect for you.”

I don’t hesitate and start tearing the paper and opening the lid of the little box. A pair of diamond earrings are sparkling under the interior light he just flipped on. “Lincoln,” I gasp.

“Do you like them?”

“Like them? I love them, but I can’t accept these. They’re too expensive. I didn’t need a gift. Just spending time with you is gift enough.”

“I want you to have them. Put them on.”

Already, I know better than to argue with him. Not on something like this. I take the earrings out and put them on my ears. I flip down the visor, and the little light comes on. I turn my head side to side, and I can’t believe how big they are. “They’re beautiful, Lincoln. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, and I can hear the pleased sound of his voice.

I close the visor and stare out the window. I didn’t get him anything today, and now I feel bad. And it’s not like I can go out now and get him anything.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I look over at him. He’s rolled his dress shirt up his forearms, and he’s clenching the steering wheel. He’s waiting for me to answer, and it’s obvious that he really cares. I’ve never, ever had anyone care about my thoughts like he does. “I didn’t get you anything.”

He shakes his head and turns off the road that leads to Whiskey Run. We’re almost home, and instead of being nervous about what might happen when we get there, I’m excited. “I didn’t expect you to get me anything.”

I nod and reach across the console and rest my hand on his thigh. I stroke my hand up and down and take a deep breath. “I want you, Linc. I want you to be my first.”

He looks at me, and the car swerves, and when we hit a bump, he pulls the wheel to get us back on the road. I put one hand on the dash and barely hold in the scream. He presses on the gas and pulls into his driveway almost on two wheels. He slams the SUV into park before we're fully stopped.

I'm sitting here, mouth hanging wide open, and he jumps out and is moving around to my side of the car. He helps me out and lifts me, carrying me up his porch. I can't help but laugh. He doesn't smirk, he doesn't say anything until he has me inside and the front door shut behind us. "I want you."

Chapter 7

Lincoln

The woman has made me a crazy person. I've been about bent over in pain from longing and the need to have her and she decides in the car, while I'm driving, that it's the best time to tell me that she wants to have sex. And not just sex. She wants me to take her virginity. Do I tell her now or later that one night is not going to be enough?

My dog Bull is excited to see us, and I let him outside to go to the bathroom. While we're waiting, I lean Avery up against the wall. "I want you," I tell her again.

I'm searching her face, looking for any regret she might have, but I don't see any. I only see desire. "Right here?"

"No. My bed. I need you in my bed."

She nods, and I start up the steps as I hear Bull barking on the porch. I love that dog, but right now, I'm wishing I had put in a doggy door. I rush to let him in and then lock the front door and then guide Avery up the steps. When we get to the top, I tell her, "Second door on the right."

She keeps moving but looks over her shoulder at me. The smile on her face lets me know that she's looking forward to this too. She wants it as badly as I do.

"Can I take your clothes off?" I ask her, already taking my jacket off her.

She shrugs her shoulders and looks at the floor. "Can you go first?"

I nod, reaching for the buttons of my shirt. One by one, I undo them and then pull the shirt off my shoulders and down my arms, and I toss it to the chair in the corner. I kick off my shoes as I take off my pants, and they land across the room with my shirt. Standing in my boxers, I pull the band and ask. "These too?"

She visibly gulps, but she doesn't look away. She nods. "Yeah, those too."

Fuck, if she keeps looking at me like that, I'm going to come before this even gets started. I suck in a deep, calming breath and pull the band of my shorts out and then down over my hard shaft and let them fall down my legs. I step out of them, and at the same time, I wrap my hand around my girth and stroke myself from root to tip. If I don't get inside her soon, I'll be coming in my hand again.

I nod at her. "Your turn."

She nods and then turns her back to me. "Can you unzip me?"

I reach for her with shaky hands and pull the zipper down her back. The sound is loud in the quiet house, increasing the anticipation of seeing her soft skin. When I'm done, I put my hands on her shoulders and turn her around to face me. I don't want to miss a second of this.

She's holding the dress up, and it's obvious she's nervous. "May I undress you?"

She lets out the breath she's been holding and nods her head quickly. I take a step toward her and pull the red material from her and then down her body. I keep my eyes on hers the whole time. I want to see her body, but I want her comfortable with it.

"May I take your bra off?"

She nods, and I reach behind her, unclasping the strap and then helping her out of it. She's standing in front of me with only her panties on, and I'm like a virgin that is about to come before I even get inside her. Her hands are covering her breasts, but that's not going to work for me. I pull her hands

away, and she clenches her eyes shut. She's breathtaking. Her breasts are large and round, and her nipples are hard little peaks that are begging to be kissed. I lean in, unable to resist. I grab her waist and pull her to me, kissing across her chest and then settling in to suckle her. Her body reacts with a jerk, and I move to the other one. Her hands go to my shoulders, down my back, and up again. Man, I'm already on the edge.

I lean down and lift her up in my arms. She laughs but swats at me playfully. "Put me down, Linc, I'm too big."

I toss her onto the bed and lie down on top of her. "You're not too big. You're perfect just the way you are."

I'm staring into her eyes, daring her to disagree with me. I don't look away until I see the acceptance there. I move to the side and slide my hand down her body. I watch as her body trembles, and when I reach her panties, my fingers go under the band and down to her wet, swollen lips. She's soaked, and I don't know if it's from earlier or now, but I know I need to taste her again.

I bring my finger up to my lips and suck it clean. She grabs on to my chin and is staring up at me with so much trust that I know I'll never do anything to hurt her. She's going to be mine after this. Fuck it, she already is.

"What is it?" I ask her, hoping she doesn't say she needs more time.

She shrugs. "I don't know... I have this weird feeling. My belly, right here"—she points to her lower abdomen—"is aching and pulling. I keep rubbing my thighs together to ease the feeling down there, and it seemed to work for a while, but not now. I don't know how to describe it, I feel empty."

She's completely sincere and doesn't realize it, but basically she's telling me she needs to be fucked. She needs my dick.

"You need me to fill you up?" I ask her. "I can make the ache go away."

She's nodding her head as she slides her panties down her legs. My eyes go straight to the V of her legs and the little

patch of hair there. Even in the moonlit room, I can see the glistening of her desire. I reach for her, and she shakes her head. “No, I uh, don’t want your hand... I want you.”

She won’t look me in the eye, and that’s not going to work for me. I put my hand on her chin and force her to look at me. “You have to say it. What do you want?”

She sucks in a breath. “I want you to put your dick inside me.” My heart stops for at least three seconds and then she says, “Please,” dragging it out as if I would deny her anything.

I put my knees on the bed and move down between her legs. She opens wider so that I can fit and at the same time, opening herself to me. I position myself at her channel, sliding my manhood back and forth along slit. With every forward rock, I’m hitting her clit with the head of my cock. She bucks each time, and damn, I bet I could come just like this. I keep going, back and forth until she’s rocking with me. It feels so good... too good.

I grip my cock and position it at her opening. I take tiny movements, pushing a little in and then backing out. Each time, I go a little deeper, and her pleasure-laced noises mount. I hold on to her hips, keeping her steady as I move in and out of her. I know the instant I hit her hymen because we both freeze. “Don’t stop,” she begs.

And even though I don’t want to hurt her, I can’t stop, so I keep going, and after three times of nudging that little barrier, I push through with a big thrust. She moans, and I stay perfectly still, letting her adjust to me. When she lifts her hips, I start to move. Back and forth, over and over, her soft whimpers filling the air around us. I look down where we’re connected, and the remnants of her barrier are covering my cock. She’s mine now. I’m claiming her, and she doesn’t know it yet, but I’m not letting her go.

I put my thumb to her clit and circle it. “Come for me, baby. Let me make you feel good.” She does as I ask, and when her orgasm rocks her body, she milks me, and I spurt my cum deep inside her womb... right where it belongs.

I was right: Once will definitely not be enough. Forever won't be either.

Chapter 8

Avery

I wake up with a jerk, unsure of where I'm at. The sudden movement has me trying to stretch my limbs, surprised by the pain in my muscles. Some muscles I didn't even know I had. In that instant, I turn my head, and there right on the pillow next to me is Lincoln. His eyes are closed, and even though his head is on his own pillow, none of the rest of him is giving me any space at all. His arm is over top of me, his hand cupping my bare breast. His leg is thrown over my lower body, and the heaviness and weight of him causes a stirring in my belly.

The smile on my face is instant, and I reach out for him but stop when I spot the ring on my finger. I never took it off last night. I look at his hand on my chest and neither did he.

I wish I could lie here and imagine that it's all real. That he's really my husband and that I have someone that is going to be by my side from now on.

I slightly run my finger across his cheek and push the hair off his face. He smiles, and I think he's going to wake up, but he doesn't. He snuggles deeper against me, and his breathing returns to steady and calm.

We didn't really talk much last night once we got here, and I'm not sure what the proper etiquette is. I want to wake him up and see what today brings. Is he going to insist I spend Christmas Day with him? Maybe we'll make cupcakes or veg out in front of the television. I frown—or maybe he'll wake up, see me still here and be upset. Maybe it really was a one-

time thing and I should leave before he gets up and throws me out.

I debate with myself back and forth, trying to figure out what I should be doing when all of a sudden it hits me. Muff!

Muff! Oh my God, Muff is going to think I deserted her. I don't think she's ever been alone overnight without me. I have to go and check on her. I move slow, but steadily, disentangling myself from Lincoln's body. Last night was good, way better than I ever dreamed, but I can't focus on that right now. I need to go and check on my cat.

I grab my clothes off the floor and walk down the stairs. When I get to the bottom landing, Bull is standing there, and I feel so judged at the way he's looking at me. "Do you need to go out?" I whisper.

He starts to bounce on his feet, and I swear quietly. Of course he needs to go out.

I let him out the front door and start tugging on clothes just as the phone rings. Oh my God!

I know I'm being a coward, but I don't even know what to do in this instance. What I want and what I should do are most likely two different things. I'd love to have just curled into Lincoln's arms and stayed there the rest of the day, but I don't think he's the type to cuddle all day. *Well, Avery, he sure did cuddle you last night.*

The voice fills my head just as I tug on my shoes and reach for the front door. I have it open when the voice on the answering machine starts to play. It's a woman's voice, and I know I shouldn't eavesdrop, but that's exactly what I do.

"Lincoln, your cell is going straight to voicemail. Anyway, this is your wifey. Sorry I couldn't make it last night. Call me. Merry Christmas."

One hand goes to my mouth that is hanging wide open, and the other goes to my stomach as if I can stop the somersault that is happening there. I feel sick, as if I'm literally going to throw up. I look up the stairs, and I want to yell and cuss, wake him up and demand answers. I hit my head

on the door. I slept with a married man. I gave my virginity to a married man.

I whisper loudly for Bull, and when he comes in, I step outside and close the door behind me. I sprint down his front porch, across the lawn, and up the stairs to my apartment. Before I'm even inside, the tears are rolling down my face. How could he do that? What was I thinking? I gave my virginity to a married man.

Muff meows from her perch in the window, and I know she's mad at me when she doesn't come to me. I go to the kitchen in a trance and open a can of tuna. I empty the packet into the cat bowl and give Muff a few strokes along her back.

I still can't believe it. Was this all a joke to him? I lift my hand to my head, and the glint of the ring I'm still wearing grabs my attention. Oh my God, am I wearing his wife's wedding ring? I slide it off my finger and set it on the kitchen counter. I want to flush it down the toilet, but it's not the woman's fault that she's married to a two-timing cheat. Oh my God, what have I done?

I strip off my clothes right in the kitchen and walk through the small apartment to the bedroom. I skip grabbing clothes, but I do make sure the curtains are drawn before turning the hot water on in the shower. I feel so dirty, and it sucks. It sucks because last night was magical and now it's all been ruined. What was I thinking? I just met him two days ago and I decided that what—he was the one?—that I should sleep with him.

I stand underneath the hot water and scrub every inch of my body. Flashes from the night before fill my mind, and I clench my eyes to clear my head. Lincoln kissing my thighs, his hand trailing down my navel, the warm, wet touch of his tongue on my nipples, the feel of him pushing inside me with care on his face. The way he took me, making sure that I was okay and that it felt good... and then I start to sob. I cry because I thought last night was special... I thought Lincoln was special. Oh my God, we didn't use anything. I could be pregnant right now.

What am I going to do?

I try to take deep, calming breaths. I know that crying and getting this upset is not going to help anything. When I feel like I can't cry anymore, I turn off the shower and start to dry myself off just as there is a banging on my door. *Don't answer it.*

That's what I tell myself, but the longer I don't answer it, the louder the banging gets. I walk out of the bathroom with the towel wrapped around me. As I get close to the front door, I can hear Lincoln's voice. "Avery, open this door before I kick it in."

I roll my eyes. His protective, sexy alpha routine was hot last night... now, knowing what I do, it's not.

I tighten the towel around me and sling open the door. "What do you want?"

Chapter 9

Lincoln

She's even more beautiful without any makeup on her face. That's the first thought that hits me, and then the next is what I was thinking when I woke up this morning and she was gone. "Why'd you leave?"

She doesn't answer me. She frowns. "Stay right here."

I put my hands on the doorway and peer into her apartment. What the fuck? She's mad, but I can't imagine what for. After the night we had, this morning is not shaping up the way I thought it would. She's walking toward me with disgust on her face. She holds the ring I gave her last night out in front of my face. "Here's your ring."

I shake my head. Fuck that, I'm not taking the ring back. She's going to be wearing that thing for real from now on. "Keep it. Put it back on."

She sighs, and her voice is laced with frustration. "No. I'm not wearing it."

I take the ring from her and slide it over her finger. "You'll wear it until you pick out what you do want."

Her mouth drops in shock, and she's shaking her head. Her whole body is trembling, but it doesn't seem to be for the same reason as last night. "I'm not wearing that ring or any ring you get me, for that matter."

She tries to slam the door, but I put my hand out to stop it. I stupidly ran over here without putting shoes on, so I'm

standing here in the freezing cold with only a pair of jogging pants on. "Let me in."

And even though she can't close the door, she holds it steady so I can't push my way in. "No."

I search her face, looking for an answer. This is not the same woman I was with last night. "What happened between last night when I made you come two times on my dick and this morning when you snuck out of my bed?"

Her body jerks, and she holds the towel tighter around her body. She feels those words. She knows and I know how her body reacted to me last night. She can't take it back now and act like nothing happened between us. She can't act like she didn't fall in love with me last night.

"I know," she says softly, and I swear there's pain in her voice.

I reach for her, and she steps back. I grit my teeth. "What? You know what?"

"I heard your wife on the phone when I left this morning."

I stare at her, waiting for her to laugh or make some indication that this is a joke. "The only wife I have is you... it may not be official yet, but to me it is."

She shakes her head. "That's not funny, Lincoln."

"I'm not joking."

She starts talking with her hands, and it's then I know that she's really upset. "Look, I heard it, okay? I heard the woman say that she was your wifey and she's sorry she couldn't make it last night. I can't believe you're married... I can't believe you'd do that to me."

My mind starts to race, and then I remember my call to my friend Barry yesterday. He said he was going to help me with a wife, even mentioned asking one of our mutual friends. "I'm not married. There never has been a Mrs. Lincoln Roberts, and in the future there will be only one Mrs. Lincoln Roberts, and I'm looking at her right now."

She grips the doorknob. "I know what I heard, Lincoln."

I look down at my feet and up to her. “Will you please let me in? I’m going to get frostbite.”

She looks down at my toes that are a bright red. She takes a step back, and I all but jump into the apartment. She moves into the room, but I just follow her. I woke up this morning with her sneaking away. I don’t want there to be any distance between us. I go to stand in front of her, and she tries to move, but I stop her. “Listen to me. Stand here until I get it all out and then you can move if you still don’t want to hear what I have to say.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and looks at me defiantly. She wants to walk away and leave me, but I’m not going to let that happen. I know that last night was special. Now I just have to convince her of it. “What you heard was the result of my friend Barry trying to help me out last night. He knew the situation I was in, and that’s who I was talking to when you came outside to take your trash. He said he would find me someone, and I told him I would take care of it but he didn’t listen. That’s all that was. I’m not married... not yet, anyway.”

Her arms drop. “You’re not married? You promise me you’re not married?”

“I’m not married, Avery. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

She bursts into tears, and I’m not ready for it. Of all her reactions, I never dreamed it would be that one. I reach for her, praying she doesn’t push me away. When she doesn’t, I gather her in my arms, lift her up, and carry her to the couch. She doesn’t stop crying, and all I can do is hold on to her, rubbing her back, assuring her that it’s all going to be okay.

When she starts to quiet down, I kiss the top of her head. “Are you okay? Talk to me, Avery.”

She sniffs and pulls back. The towel is still snug around her, but the slit up her thigh is open wide, showing me all her pretty, pink parts. I try to calm my thoughts and focus on her. I can wait for the rest.

“I thought you were married... I thought we had sex and you were married.”

“I’m not married, and I’m sorry about last night.”

Her eyes flick up to mine, and I’m quick to continue. “I’m not sorry we made love, but I am sorry I rushed you. I should have waited.”

“I didn’t want to wait. I was ready. I wanted to.”

“Is that why you ran from my bed this morning?”

She shakes her head and gestures to the corner where Muff is licking her paws and staring at us between swipes. “I had to take care of Muff, and well, I wasn’t sure... if you wanted me to stay or if I should go so I came home and thought we would figure it out later. I let Bull out, and it’s then I heard the message.”

I cup her face in my hands. “I always want you to stay. Always. That is never a question. I want you in my bed with me.”

She puts her hand to mine and pulls it from her face. “Lincoln, you don’t.”

I shake my head. She doesn’t understand. “There’s something I need to tell you, but I don’t want you to freak out.”

She smirks, and I wipe the wetness off her cheek. “The only way I’m going to freak out is if you tell me that you’re married.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not married,” I tell her again and I’m starting to think that I’m going to have to find a way to reassure her, but fuck, if I have to tell her what she means to me twenty times a day, I’ll do it.

“Okay, then tell me. You won’t freak me out.”

I take a deep breath. I wasn’t ready for this, and if she hadn’t run out on me, I probably would have waited to tell her. But now, after everything, I know I want to wake up every day with her next to me. “I want you. I want you in my bed, in my life... any way I can have you, I want you.”

She's shaking her head, and I know she doesn't believe what I'm saying. Well, either she doesn't believe it or she's scared to. "When I woke up this morning and you were gone, I figured out a lot of things quickly. Number one, I don't want to do that. I don't want to wake up without you. Number two, I don't want to sleep without you anymore. And, well, don't freak out, and if you want to freak out, don't. Just know I'll wait for as long as I need to for you to catch up."

She tilts her head, searching my eyes. I know if she looks hard enough she'll see the love shining there. How could she not? "I want you to marry me... for real. I want you to be my wife."

She tries to get up, and I hold her to me. "No, you're not getting up. I know we just met, and I know you need time. I'll give that to you, but I want you to know where I stand and how I feel."

Her hands go to my chest. "You're being serious." It's more of a statement than a question, but I still nod my head.

"Is this because I could be pregnant?"

My hand goes to her belly, and I flatten my palm there. "Fuck, I hope so."

"Well, I hope you're not kidding. Two times last night, Lincoln. It's a possibility."

"Good."

She leans back to look at my face. "Good? Really, you say good?"

I nod. "Yep, I want you to have our babies."

She's staring at me, and I hope I don't regret asking her. "What about you? What do you want?"

She looks up at the ceiling and then back at me. "I thought of something."

I play along but ask her nervously, "What? What do you want?"

She shifts in my lap. “No, I’m thinking you really like my cupcakes. Right?”

I nuzzle her neck. “I love your cupcakes.”

She puts her hand on my thigh and squeezes. “Is that why you’re asking me to be your wife?”

I smile indulgently. “You’re what I want. The cupcakes are just a bonus.”

She shifts in my lap, spreading her thighs and positioning her core right over my hard cock. “Merry Christmas, Linc.” She pauses and nods her head. “I know it’s crazy, but yes.”

My mouth drops when I realize what she’s telling me. “Yes? So you’ll be my wife?”

She holds up her hand. “I already have the ring on.”

I can’t wait any longer. I kiss her then, showing her exactly what she means to me. We may have done things a little backwards, but it’s all working out. She’s going to be my wife... and the mother of my children. That’s the only thing that matters.

Epilogue

Avery

Five years later

I run the kids over to my aunt and uncle's and then run back home to shower and get ready. Everything is set in the kitchen; now I just need to get the baby throw-up and everything else off me before Linc gets home. It's been a hectic day—heck, it's been a hectic month, but no matter how tired I am, I'm not changing my plans.

I'm stepping out of the shower when I hear the front door open and shut and Linc's ritual of yelling, "Honey, I'm home."

I wrap the towel around me and jog halfway down the steps. "You're home early."

He takes one look at me, picks me up, and carries me up the stairs. "Yep, and it looks like I got here at just the right time."

I wrap my hands around his neck. "Actually, I had a whole seduction scene that included a candlelit dinner and your favorite dessert, and I was even going to let you lick the icing off me like you like."

He's groaning as he gets to the top of the stairs. "I'll take all that, but first I need to be inside you."

I reach down between us and cup his bulge. He's hard, and I massage him through his pants. "You're right. You definitely need something."

He throws me to the bed. "You, that's what I need."

I pull the towel off and watch as he undresses. He's still as handsome as ever. His hard abs on full display have my mouth watering, and when he steps out of his pants, his hard manhood lengthening and bobbing between his legs, well, there's no way I can stop myself from leaning over and getting a taste. I lick his length as his lower body bucks against my mouth. "What's the special occasion?" he asks.

I stop midlick and stare up at him. Did he forget? Surely, he hasn't forgotten the first day we met, December twenty-third, exactly five years ago. When our eyes meet, I see the smoldering affection on his face and the amusement. I slap at his rock-hard abs. "Lincoln!"

He bends over and pulls a box from his pants. "Happy anniversary, baby."

I take the box and am about to open it but stop myself. There's absolutely nothing in this box that will bring me more joy than he does. I stand up, shimmying my ass as I walk across the room and set the unopened box on the dresser. "Let's see. You've given me two beautiful daughters, a life that I still can't believe is mine, and I get to be next to you, go through this life... with you. I don't need any gifts, Linc. All I need is you."

He walks toward me and cups my face. "You have me."

I trail my hand down his stomach and wrap my hand around his hard length. "You're right, I do."

I smile up at him before I drop to my knees and take him in my mouth. My life didn't turn out how I expected... it turned out way better. And I have Linc to love for it.

Epilogue 2

Lincoln

Ten Years Later

hope I'm doing the right thing.

I The girls are older now and doing their own thing. It's painful to see, but I think Avery's taking it even harder than I am. This was once her dream, but now I'm wondering if I should have talked to her about it first.

Instantly, I shake my head. No, if I was going to do it, this was the only way. Avery is all about doing for other people, and if I brought up this idea to her, she would have come up with something else we should spend our money on. She would have wanted to add to the girls' college funds or something like that. No, a surprise was the only way to go about it.

I stand at the front of the unit and look around. It's filled with the best ovens and baking equipment money can buy. For fifteen years, Avery has made her cupcakes and cookies as a side job. To this day, it's something she loves doing. It was her dream to own her own shop. She never wanted to own a bakery, but she did want a bigger space so she could expand her catering business. And for years, she's put it off. First, it was because we were in the early stages of parenthood, and the girls needed her at home. Then it was because the girls had practices and games that Avery didn't want to miss. But now the girls are growing up and able to drive themselves places.

I fiddle with my hands. Fuck, I haven't been this nervous since the day Avery and I got married. I was so worried she'd

change her mind I didn't give her a lot of time from the point where I asked her to marry me to the wedding.

My phone dings, and I look at it. Chloe, my oldest, sent me a text. "We're almost there." She did a whole line of excited emojis afterward, and I give it a thumbs-up before pocketing my phone.

I take one last look to make sure everything is perfect. Every bit of chrome and steel has been wiped clean and is sparkling. I step outside and try not to pace as I stare down the road, waiting for my daughter's VW bug to pull onto the street.

As soon as I see it, my heart starts to race, and my palms get sweaty. Fuck, I hope she loves it.

Chloe parks the car, and Avery and Chloe jump out while Landry, our youngest, climbs out from the back.

"Hey, ladies," I say as I pull my wife into my arms.

Avery's arms go around my waist. "Hey, honey. I didn't know you were meeting us for dinner." She looks up and down the street. I was able to get her a location right off Main Street, and we're close to everything. "Are we going to Red's?"

I shrug. "We can go wherever you choose, but first, I have something I want to show you."

She blinks up at me. "Okay." When she sees the solemn look on my face, she looks around, and the excited looks on our daughters' faces are giveaways that this is something more than just a dinner date. She moves closer to me. "What is it? What's going on, and why does it seem everyone knows about it but me?"

I take a deep breath and let it out. "Okay, so I..."

My oldest interrupts. "We, Daddy. We..."

I shake my head. "Of course. We wanted to surprise you..."

Avery puts her hand at my waist. I suck in a breath at her touch. Even after all these years, I'm a sucker for her touch. "A surprise? Linc, you know how I am about surprises."

I shake my head. Ever since the day she heard that woman on my answering phone claiming to be my wife, she's hated any kind of surprise, and remembering that makes me even more worried about what I've done. "It's a good one, I promise, but before I show you, I want you to know that this is something you used to always talk about. I hope I did the right thing, but I want you to know that if your dreams have changed at all, you don't have to take this... I mean, we can do something else with it."

She looks at me curiously, trying to figure out what I'm saying. "Okaaaay."

I shake my head because obviously I'm not doing this right. "Look, let's just show you."

I point to the unit we're standing in front of. Chloe has the door open, and Landry is already inside. I put an arm around Avery and walk her inside. She gasps when she sees it, her hand covering her mouth. Her hot pink logo is on the wall in front of us, and it stands out against the white paint.

She reaches for me, grabbing my shirt front. "Linc, what did you do?"

I pull her around the room. "Look, I know you never wanted to be tied down to a store, so it's not a storefront, but you needed a bigger space to expand on catering. The ladies at Sugar Glaze are excited and ready to place orders for your macaroons."

I show her the commercial grade ovens, the cooling racks, and the catering boxes. Literally, anything she would need is here already. It's not until we've walked completely around the whole kitchen that I realize she hasn't said a word. "Avery, honey, what do you think?"

She looks at me with unshed tears in her eyes. "You always know what I need... what I want, Linc. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but this, wow, I love it."

I let out a breath, and it's like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Avery wraps her arms around my waist and holds me tightly. "I love it, I love it."

Chloe and Landry come over to join in on the hug. I don't want to let Avery go, but the girls insist on taking her around the room again and showing her everything. I watch my three girls, and I swear my heart can't get any bigger. They are my world.

Obviously, I've been lost in thought because Landry and Chloe are both walking toward me with their hands held out. "Uh..."

Avery walks up behind them. "I told them they could skip dinner with us and go meet up with their friends. I hope that's okay with you."

By the twinkle I catch in my wife's eye, I know exactly why she's trying to send our girls off, and I'm not complaining a bit. I hold out a wad of cash, and they take it. I follow behind them and lock the door when they leave.

Avery is walking behind the counter, stroking her hand on the clean countertop. "This is perfect, Linc."

I walk toward her. "You're perfect."

She stops. "You really believe that, don't you?"

I take the last few steps and reach for her. "If you even doubt it, then I'm not doing my job right."

She puts her arms around my neck and fits her body against mine. "Your job?"

I lean down and kiss her until she's breathless. I want more, but I'm willing to wait. "Yeah, honey. My job... to make sure you know how beautiful, smart, and strong you are."

She goes to her tiptoes and presses her breasts into my chest. "Well, I'd say you're pretty great at your job."

I breathe her in. "Can I take you home now?"

She releases her hold on me, and I let her step out of my arms. She walks slowly backwards. "Actually, I was thinking that tonight's already been so perfect... I don't want to have to wait for what's next."

I stalk toward her, trying to take it slowly, but the need to have her is intense. “It’s your night, you shouldn’t have to wait for what you want.”

She nods and steps farther into the backroom. I can see her from this angle, but anyone out on the street couldn’t. She reaches for the hem of her dress and pulls it up her body and then drops it to the floor. She’s standing in front of me in her bra, panties, and heels. “That’s good ‘cause I want you, Linc, and I don’t want to wait.”

I take the few steps dividing us and grip her hips. “I’m yours, Avery. Always have been, always will be.”

She juts her chin up at me. “Prove it.”

I take her challenge and spend the next hour showing her over and over how I’m hers and she’s mine... forever.

Sleighbing Mr. Right

Chapter 1

Candy

I should have known, when I walked to his truck to get in and he didn't open the door for me, how this night was going to go. I thought he could possibly be the one. He checked off almost everything on my 'Mr. Right' list. Well, except for being a gentleman.

I look at his slicked-back hair and the white turtleneck he's wearing. Didn't men stop wearing turtlenecks... hell, what am I talking about, I don't know any man that wears them. "So, uh, Mark, thanks again for taking me to pick up the tree for the office."

I'm an assistant at an accounting office and I'm picking up the Christmas tree. I don't mind though. I haven't celebrated Christmas the last few years, but I used to love it. Give me hot chocolate, sweaters, boots and holiday cheer any day. However, maybe I should have gone by myself to get it.

He smiles, not taking his eyes off the road. "Sure, no problem. Happy to help."

Okay, I think to myself. This is more like it. Maybe he is a good guy.

He reaches across the console and squeezes my knee. "Plus, you'll owe me one after this. And I know exactly what I want." His hand slides up my thigh and I squeeze my legs together and stop his roaming.

I turn my legs away from him, and he slides his hand back to the console. Good, maybe he got the hint. But just in case he didn't, I tell him, "Yeah, that's not happening."

His jaw tightens, but he doesn't comment.

Damn, now I'm stuck in this truck with him for the duration and he's going to know where I live. Yep, I didn't think this one through.

Mark works as an insurance adjuster in the office next to mine. He's been asking me out for weeks and I finally told him yes. But only after he had checked off some of the items on my list. He's older than me, but I like older men so that was never a problem. But something always made me tell him no. Obviously, I should have stuck with my gut on this one.

Almost twenty minutes from the time he picks me up, we pull into the tree farm lot. Stupidly I sit in the car, thinking he might come around to open the door, but when he stands at the front of the truck and throws his hands up, like, *What the hell are you doing?* I get out, shaking my head.

"Sorry, I thought you were coming around to get the door for me."

He snorts. "What, your hand broke?"

I squeeze the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. "Okay, so let's get a tree."

I walk into the entrance under the sign that says, 'Mountain Christmas Tree Farm.'

There are twinkling lights everywhere. I hug into my jacket and take in the festive decorations, the families searching for their perfect Christmas tree, the people drinking cocoa, and all the fun things to do here. Memories hit me of my and my granny doing this exact thing and I rub my hand over my chest soothingly. If I had come alone, I definitely would've spent some time exploring. But now, I just want to get out of here.

Stalking over to the trees, I can't stop my hips from shimmying at the Christmas music blaring through the speakers. I don't look back to see if Mark is following. Honestly, I don't care if he does.

When I get to some decent size trees, and I think I found the one, I look around for help, already doubting I'm going to

get it from Mark.

Cane

As soon as I saw her, I turned the customer I was helping over to my part-time help and followed her through the maze of trees, watching her wide hips sway to the beat of the music. While she admires the trees, I'm admiring her.

Her red hair is in curls hanging down her back. Her fitted jeans cling to her round butt and thick thighs. She has black boots that go all the way up to her knees and a black jacket wrapped around her. It's bulky, hiding her upper body from me, but I know already that I want to see more.

When she starts looking around, I adjust my cock in my pants and walk up to her. "Can I help you?"

Her eyes widen when she sees me, and I try not to act like I notice when her eyes stray down my body and back up. However, the longer she looks, the harder I get. I swear her eyes pop up to mine, wide and filled with lust, probably because she saw my crotch twitch at her gaze.

"Uh, yeah. How tall do you think this tree is?" she asks, and I swear her voice is the voice of an angel.

I take a step forward like I'm trying to measure it against my height. In all reality, I just want to get closer to her. "Probably around six foot three inches."

She clasps her hands together in front of her. "That's perfect. I'll take it." The smile on her face is contagious and I can't stop myself from smiling back at her. Damn, she's too cute.

A man walks up to her, sliding his arm around her waist, and instantly my fists clench at my sides. "Is this the tree? That's going to be tough getting it up the steps to your house. Oh, you'll definitely be putting out for this."

She struggles to get out of his arms, but he only tightens his grip. "Let go of me, Mark," she hisses. "And I think we've already discussed this. I'm not sleeping with you."

I guess he doesn't get the picture, because he holds a twig of mistletoe over her head. "Pucker up..." Since she can't struggle from his grasp, she turns her head, disgust on her face.

Not able to stand by any longer, I reach over and dig my hand into his neck, causing him to release her and buckle to his knees. "I don't think the lady appreciates the way you're talking to her or manhandling her, son."

Okay, he's probably only five or ten years younger than me, but his behavior reminds me of a kid. He grimaces in pain, but I don't let up. I grip him harder, all the time wondering what in the world she's doing with this pansy. "Apologize."

I hate to see a man mistreat a woman. I peer over at her and I can tell she's embarrassed... but maybe also a little relieved. He glares at her, then at me, before nodding his head. I let him up and he backs a few feet away. "Fuck that, I'm not apologizing to that fat bitch."

He's got balls, I'll give him that. He takes off running toward his car, and I turn to go get him. The woman wraps her hand around my bicep. "He's not worth it. Honestly, you saved me from a terrible ride home and an awkwardness trying to get him to leave."

"He shouldn't talk to you like that," I tell her. "No man should treat or talk to a woman like that." Plus, that guy is dense if he thinks she's fat. She's breathtaking. Her curves have my mouth watering and the crotch of my jeans working harder to contain my hard length.

Her blush colors her face prettily. She blows out a cold breath. "Yeah, well, I didn't know he was like that. He checked off everything on my list." Her face pinches when she realizes what she just said.

I smile at how cute she is. I should wipe the smirk off my face to not embarrass her anymore. "Your list?"

Chapter 2

Candy

Sometimes I don't know when to keep my mouth closed. Trying to change the subject, I tell him, "My name's Candy, by the way. Thank you for your help." I wave my hand, gesturing to the truck squealing its tires as it pulls out of the lot onto the road.

His smile gets deeper and he strokes his hand along his salt and pepper beard. *Lumberjack*. That's the first thing that comes to my mind. The man is built like a lumberjack. I mean, he looks like he bench presses Christmas trees for a living. His flannel shirt is covering his arms, but I can almost imagine what they look like. "Cane, my name's Cane. It's nice to meet you, Candy."

You have got to be kidding me. I can tell he sees the reference by the way he stresses the words Candy and Cane. His eyes look me up and down. "So you want this tree?" His voice is husky, almost filled with lust, and my lower belly tightens at the sound.

I shake my head, trying to gather my wits about me. "Yes, well, no actually. He was sort of my ride. I'm going to call an Uber and I'll come back another day to get the tree."

I should walk away. I mean, I've made my excuses... but I don't want to. I pull my phone out of my coat pocket, getting ready to open the ride app.

His hand circles my wrist, pulling me closer. My head tilts back to look up at him, and it pushes my breasts against his

firm chest. Biting my lower lip, I try to stop the moan from leaving my mouth.

“I’ll deliver your tree. And take you home.” He brushes a stray hair off my face, and I can’t look away from him. His bright blue eyes are holding me hostage.

Without even blinking, I tell him, “I can’t let you do that.”

His eyes go to my lips, and he stares at them - hard. “I want to.”

I should tell him no and find my own way home. But a part of me wants to forget my list for finding Mr. Right and just live in the moment. One night of not weighing a list of do’s and don’ts, one night of not trying to calculate my whole life. I mean, look where the list got me with Mark. Obviously, it’s flawed.

I feel his chest expand, and he takes a deep breath before stepping away from me. “This one? Is this the tree you want?”

I nod my head, unable to speak because my body is trembling from the loss of his heat against me.

He hefts the tree up on his shoulder and starts to walk away. Just seeing him standing there with a damn tree on his shoulders has my core tighten. I follow him, watching the way his butt moves in his jeans. I almost run right into the back of him when he stops suddenly and turns toward me. Luckily I didn’t run into the tree. That would’ve been embarrassing.

“I’m going to strap this in the truck,” he says. “Do you want to look around for a minute? I can get you a cup of coffee or cocoa to help warm you up.”

Thinking maybe I do need a minute, I tell him I would like to check out the décor and I’ll get us a hot drink. He asks for a coffee and I watch him walk away before heading to the other side of the lot.

Taking a deep breath, I try to control my racing heart. I’ve never felt this kind of attraction to someone. It heats my whole body and awakens things I’ve never felt before. I stroll through the displays, picking a beautiful wreath and paying the vendor before I walk to the drink stand. I order a coffee and a

hot cocoa, but when I reach into my purse, the man holds his hand up.

He winks when I look at him. “The boss man already called. He said the pretty lady gets it free.”

Surprised, I thank him and put some money into his tip jar.

I walk back toward the parking lot and once I get to the truck, Cane is standing there, holding the passenger side door open. I hand him his drink and he thanks me.

“No thanks necessary. You didn’t even let me pay for it,” I admonish him.

He takes both the drinks and reaches inside his truck to set them in the cup holder. He then takes the wreath out from under my arm and puts it into the back seat. Then he holds his hand out and I grab it to heft myself up into the tall cab. When I have trouble getting in, he releases my hand, grips my hips and puts me up into the truck, fastening my seatbelt around me.

I’m stunned. He doesn’t even seem winded from lifting me. “Uhm, thanks.”

He stops with his face close to mine. His hand brushes my cheek. “Anytime, sweetness.”

Cane

She sure is tempting. Too bad I’ve sworn off relationships. When my ex-wife cheated on me, it sort of ruined me for other women. Candy is the first woman that has piqued my interest in a long time.

As soon as I get in my seat, her scent hits my nose. She’s not only beautiful, but she also smells good.

I already had the truck running, and I welcome the warmth as I rub my hands together. “Where are we going?”

She turns sideways in the seat to face me. “Well, the tree is for my office, but I don’t want to have you go to two places tonight. We can just take it to my house. I live downtown.”

I almost laugh because she thinks it's a burden for me to spend more time with her. "No. Let me help you get the tree set up in your office. Maybe later I can take you to dinner before taking you home?"

Indecision crosses her face and I worry that she is about to turn me down, but she surprises me with a lift of her shoulders. "Why not? My office is on Bruce Street."

I turn to the road, put the truck into gear and take off toward downtown. "Okay, so I have to ask. What is the list?"

She feigns ignorance. "What list?"

I look over at her and she's looking in the opposite direction out the window. "The list you mentioned earlier. When you said your date checked off everything on the list."

She groans and puts her hand to her temple. "Okay, fine, I'm a list person. I like to make lists. I have a list of what I'm looking for in Mr. Right."

I laugh and when she looks my way with her eyebrows raised, sort of like I've offended her, I explain, "I think you need to work on that list – especially if your boyfriend aced it."

"He's not my boyfriend. It was our first date and I've known him for weeks and finally agreed to go out with him. I have never seen the side of him that I did tonight." She sighs.

"I hope you're not going to go out with him again?" Surely she's smarter than that. She's too damn good for him.

She looks at me disgustedly. "Of course not. It was definitely a mistake. I usually don't date men that call me a fat bitch. Of course, work might be a little awkward." When I look at her questioningly, she shrugs her shoulders. "He works next door to my office."

My chest tightens. I don't have any right to, but a possessive feeling consumes me. I don't want him talking to her—hell, I don't want him to breathe the same air as her. "Maybe I should pay him a visit. I'm not going to let him harass you."

She looks at me with surprise. “Cane, I can take care of myself. I’ve done it for a long time now.”

I decide to leave her alone about it. It’s not in my nature to stand by and let a woman take care of a problem on her own. But obviously Candy is independent. Hopefully, she’ll tell me if she needs my help. “Fine, but promise you’ll tell me if he bothers you.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Cane, we just met. I’m not going to get you involved.” She looks out the window again.

I reach over and touch her hand, giving it a quick squeeze. “I’ll be around... Promise me.”

She looks shocked, but finally nods her head agreeably.

“I’m at the corner of the next block.” She interrupts my thought, pointing ahead of us.

I park in front of her office and immediately jog around the truck to open the door. She hesitates before she climbs down and I can’t stop myself from picking her up from the seat and lowering her slowly to the ground. I wanted to slide her body down mine, but I figured she’s already had a rough night. I don’t want to pressure her or try to take advantage of her.

I walk to the back of the truck and pick up the tree stand I brought with me. “Can you carry this if I grab the tree?”

“Sure.” She takes it from my hands and goes to unlock the door.

I flick the strap and pick up the tree. When I walk through the door she’s holding open, she points to the big bay windows at the front of the office, and I lean the tree up against the wall.

I stalk over to her and put my hand out for the stand. When she holds it out, I take it from her and go to set it up. Picking up the tree, I set it on the base and take a step back to look at it. She did well. The tree is a perfect fit.

“Do you want to decorate it?” I ask her. I’m grasping at straws to extend my time with her.

Instantly, she shakes her head side to side. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

Chapter 3

Candy

We agreed on dinner and walked the two blocks to the restaurant. I can't stop myself from ticking off things on my list. He's handsome, he's kind, he's smart and funny, and he's a gentleman. I haven't opened a door since I've met him. How is it that I'm already feeling this attraction to him when I only met him a few hours ago?

He opens the door for me, and I can't stop the smile that crosses my lips.

He puts his hand at the small of my back. "What are you smiling about?"

I lean my head back to look up at him. We walk up to the hostess stand and he tells her we need a table for two. As she leads us to our table, the hostess keeps looking back at him, her interest shining in her eyes. But him, well, his eyes are trained on me.

He tugs on my hair and I shake my head to focus on what he's saying. He asks again, "Huh, why are you smiling?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I was smiling because you keep opening doors for me."

His eyebrows pinch together. "Honey, if the men you go out with don't open doors for you, then you're going out with the wrong men."

His hand slides from my back to my side and his fingers grab on to the curve of my hip. He pulls me against him and

I'm pretty sure that my panties are soaked just from that one possessive touch.

Once he holds my chair out for me and I sit down, he sits across from me. I open the menu—heck, I need something to look at besides him. I'm sure that my eyes are filled with longing.

I take off my jacket and hang it on to the chair back behind me. His gaze roams my figure and I can tell by the glint in his eyes that he likes what he sees.

The server takes our order and I have to give her my menu, forcing me to look across the table at him.

I clasp my hands together in front of me. "So, Cane, tell me, have you always been a tree farmer?"

He leans back in his chair. "The tree farm has been in our family for generations. I help out in the holidays and take that time to focus on family. I develop apps in my normal job."

I lift the glass of wine to my lips, the thought 'family man' going through my head. Clearing my throat, I ask, "What kind of apps do you develop?"

"I've created a few dating apps, shopping apps, a few video games... whatever project I decide to take on." He shrugs his shoulders then asks me, "So accounting? What made you get into that?"

I lift my shoulders up and lean toward him. "Right now, I'm just an assistant. I took college classes in high school and I've almost finished my degree. I have always loved numbers. I love that you can add two plus two and get four... that if I have a problem, I just plug in the numbers and just like that"—I snap my fingers—"I get the answer."

He smiles at me and nods like he understands completely. "I get it. Developing apps is the same for me. That's great you've found something you love to do."

The server walks up and sets our plates on the table in front of us. I take a bite of the eggplant parmigiana, moaning with my lips around the fork. "I love their food here."

He leans forward, his eyes on my lips the whole time. “And I love watching you eat their food.”

Cane

She blushes and points her fork to my plate. “Are you going to eat?”

I slide it toward her. “I am. Do you want to try it?”

The smile she gives me makes me want to give her all my food and I would be content to just sit here and watch her eat it.

She scoops up a bite of my chicken Alfredo and brings it to her mouth. The same seductive moan escapes her and I feel my loins tighten, making me want to put my hand down between my legs and adjust myself. While she chews her food, she dips her fork back into my plate but this time, she brings it up to my mouth. Seeing her eyes on my lips, I take a bite, not tasting the food. Just the thought that I’ve had my lips where hers were causes me to groan.

Her eyes widen and a small gasp leaves her. Yeah, payback is a bitch.

“That’s good,” I tell her and she nods her head.

“Yeah, it’s really good.”

The conversation is light the rest of the meal. It has to be; my body can’t take much more. I take a drink of water. “So you know I have to ask.”

Her forehead creases in confusion. “Ask me what?”

“Why did your boss wait until a few days before Christmas to get a tree?”

Pain flitters across her face, but just as quickly, it’s gone. “It’s my fault actually. I’ve worked at the accounting office since I was a junior in high school and well, the boss has sort of taken me under her wing. Well, uh, Christmas has been hard the last couple of years and she stopped decorating because of me. But, this year, well, I decided it was time to move on. So even though it’s last minute, I’m still going to make the most of it.”

I reach across the table and cover her hand with mine. "I'm sorry, Candy, I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

She shakes her head. "No, really, it's fine. My parents have been in and out of my life forever. I can go months without hearing from them and I can forget seeing them or hearing from them on holidays. I was mostly raised by my granny and well, when she passed away, Christmas was hard on me. It reminds me of all our traditions. But really, there's so many good memories, I think I just needed time, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it," I tell her solemnly. It's amazing how wise she is for someone so young. It sounds like she's gone through hell and back but she's not giving up. I squeeze her hand to reassure her, but really what I want to do is hold her in my arms and tell her it's all going to be okay.

We finish the meal and walk back to my truck. I lift her up into the cab, gripping her hips in my hands. Shutting the door, I take a deep breath, adjust myself and get into the driver's seat.

She gives me directions to her house and once we're there, I stride to her side of the truck and when I help her out, I can't resist; I let her body slide down mine until her feet hit the ground. She catches her breath and stares up at me, neither one of us breathing. I don't want this moment to end. I still have my hands gripping her hips and she smiles up at me so innocently. I lean down and kiss her forehead before taking her hand in mine and walking her to the door.

The whole time she is digging her key out and trying to open the door, I am trying to figure out a way to make sure I see her again. Before she walks in, I put a hand to her shoulder, stopping her.

"I want to see you again," I blurt out.

Her cheeks are red. It's either from the cold or I affect her. I'm hoping for the latter. "Aren't you coming in?"

I shake my head. Damn, I want to. I want to go in more than anything I've wanted in a long time. "That's probably not a good idea."

The hair on the nape of my neck is standing straight up. I feel like my body is an electric wire just standing this close to her. We would be good together. There's no doubt about it.

Her eyes lower to the ground. "Yeah, uh, sure. I understand. I owe you for the tree. I will come by and pay sometime this week."

She starts to close the door and I grit my teeth together before putting my boot out and stopping her. "Candy, I want to come in. I really want to come in. But I know if I do, I'm not going to be able to keep my hands off you."

Her lips turn up and her smile widens. "Well, that's exactly what I was hoping for, Cane."

Well, fuck yeah. I follow her inside and briefly look around before she takes off her jacket and hangs it on a peg by the door.

"Can I take your jacket?" she asks.

I take it off and hang it next to hers.

When I turn back to her, I can tell she's nervous.

She licks her lips. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Chapter 4

Candy

I watch him as he looks around the room and I know the question before he even asks it. “Yeah, uh, I haven’t got a tree for here yet. I might before Christmas. Or maybe I’ll wait. We’ll see.”

He nods understandingly and takes a step toward me.

Never in a million years did I ever dream this would be happening tonight. And even if I just met him, I don’t care. I couldn’t imagine sending him away.

He reaches for me and brushes my hair back off my shoulders. He bends down, touching his lips to the side of my neck, and my body stiffens.

“Do you want me here, honey?” His hot breath tickles my skin and he places delicate kisses up my neck until he’s looking me in the eyes. The brown and silver stubble on his chin tickles me and my heart begins to race.

My voice is husky and laced with lust. “Yes.” To make sure he understands just how much I want him here, I stroke my hand down his stomach until I reach his hard length. I squeeze him, and he moans, latching his lips to mine.

I open my mouth to allow him entry and he sweeps his tongue along mine. His hand goes to the side of my neck and tightens around me, pulling me in close.

He pulls away to ask, “Where’s your bedroom, honey?” He lifts me up and my legs go around him. His hands are on my ass and I can’t stop myself from grinding against him.

“Down the hall, second door on the left,” I tell him, and my body convulses when he bites my neck.

He turns on the light when we walk in my room and sets me down at the foot of the bed. “I’m going to get the light.”

But before I get a step away, he stops me and drags me back over to him. “No, honey. I want to see all of you tonight. The light stays on.”

He starts tugging my shirt over my head, but I stop him. “Uh, Cane, really, I would be more comfortable with the lights out.”

He stops, but doesn’t pull away. If anything, he steps closer to me and I feel his hard cock pressing into my belly.

“Baby, if that’s what you want, I’ll turn them off, but feel me. You do this to me. Your hot little body about has me coming in my jeans.” He undoes the button of my jeans and the sound of him unzipping my pants fills the room.

I’m totally out of my element here. The very few times that I’ve had sex, I’ve had it on the bed, under the covers with the lights off. My body tenses, and he must realize how uncomfortable I am because he releases me and starts to go to switch the light back off.

I take a deep breath and stop him by placing my hand on his chest. “No, I want to see you too.”

He smiles at me before tugging off his boots, his jeans and his shirt. He’s standing before me in only a pair of boxers and his hardness looks like it won’t be contained for long.

I gawk at his hard body. It’s no wonder he was able to lift that tree without breaking a sweat. He is pure muscle. He has tattoos up and down his arms and I take a step toward him to get a closer look. I run my finger from his shoulder, tracing a tattoo, until I land at his wrist. Goosebumps raise on his arms and he swiftly takes a deep breath. His bare shoulders roll backwards and I look at the large, muscled torso that leads down into the V of his hips.

He reaches for me then, and this time when he takes my shirt off, I don’t even try to stop him. He makes quick work of

removing my clothes and when I'm standing before him naked, my eyes are clenched tightly.

When the back of his hand grazes my nipple, I suck in a breath at the contact.

"Open your eyes, honey," he pleads with me, touching my breasts with each hand before he kneads them, rubbing my hard points.

I open my eyes and look at him. The desire in his eyes is too much and I clench my eyes again.

He takes off his shorts swiftly, then runs his hands up my body. He kisses my lips and pulls back. "I want you looking at me while I look at this beautiful body. You're perfection." His hands stroke my heavy mounds and with his lower body pressed to mine, I can feel the wet precum rubbing against my belly. Instinctively, I reach down and with my hand, I rub it into my skin.

"I'm not..." I start to tell him, but he silences me with his mouth. When he pulls away, I'm breathless and couldn't talk if I wanted to.

"You're perfect, Candy." He drops to his knees in front of me and when he kisses my belly, tracing a line with his tongue, I feel it in my chest. This man is dangerous. He can make me feel things I've never felt before.

He hooks my leg over his shoulder and I can feel the sticky wetness on my thighs. He breathes me in, leans toward me and ravages me with his tongue. "Fuck." The cuss word slips from my mouth before I can stop it.

He shakes his head side to side, pulls away and huskily says, "So good. Damn, you taste so good" before he dives back in and latches on to me again.

I thread my hands through his hair, holding him to me. My head falls back as he suckles my swollen nub. I'm open completely to him, at his mercy. My toes curl into the carpet as his pressure on me increases. My hips jerk and the pleasure is too intense... it's too much. I try to pull away from him, but he doesn't let me. His hands slide around to my ass, holding me

there, exactly where he wants me. And when I give up the futile attempt to slip away, I bask in his touch, deciding to just let it happen. He moans against my sex, and the vibrations shoot through my body until I'm taut and straining under his touch. His hand on my thigh grips me almost punishingly until the climax takes over and I'm coming all around him.

He stands up, licking his lips, and my face flushes at what I just let him do to me. I don't have any time to think about it. He lays me back on the bed and stands over me, just looking at my naked body.

The lust is shining in his eyes and I can't take my eyes off of him and for the first time, I look at the long rod between his legs. I gasp at the sight. I lift up on my elbows to look at him. His cock is huge, hard and just while I'm staring at it, a pearl of precum glistens from his tip.

I wet my lower lip, wishing I could taste him. He pulls a condom from his jeans pocket on the floor before climbing on top of me. He sits back on his knees, his cock resting on my abdomen.

"Oh baby, if that isn't a picture." He palms my globes, pushing them together while leaning forward and sliding his shaft between my breasts. A moan escapes me and my back arches, pushing against him.

I lift my knees, wanting more from him, drawing him closer to me. He backs up and rips the wrapper off the condom before he rolls it on to his hardness. He lines up at my center, using both his hands to spread me open for him.

I can't take my eyes off of him. I don't even blink. His girth slowly fills me. When I flinch, he stops and I look into his eyes, which are boring into me. I give him the briefest smile and he starts to move again. My body adjusts to him, but once he's fully seated and I feel his balls resting on my ass, I lift my hips against him, wanting more of him, all of him.

His hands go to my hips and he tries to control the friction, but I don't let him. Lying underneath him with our bodies joined brings a whole new level of wanting to me. I won't stop until he's calling my name and my already sensitive flesh

blooms again. My hips lift against him, pushing him deeper into my womb. He lifts my hips off the bed, penetrating me at a different angle. The pleasure is too much. He works his way in and out of me, and my eyes roll back in my head as satisfaction washes down my body.

“You’re so beautiful, Candy. Come for me again, baby. Come with me... Now!” he urges me and when he says the word, my body flushes as I writhe underneath of him, clenching on to his manhood, milking him.

Cane

I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than Candy when she lets her orgasm take over and blissfully forgets all her insecurities. Her head thrown back, her eyes closed, and her curvy body arched against mine sends shockwaves down my body.

For a man that has sworn off women, I’ve definitely fallen hard for this one. I slowly pull out of her and her eyes fly open. The beautiful green orbs burn through me and I try to imagine what she’s thinking. I brush my lips across hers and whisper to her that I’ll be right back.

I go to the bathroom and do my business. When I walk back into her room, she’s standing next to the bed with a baby blue robe wrapped around her and she’s knotting the belt at her waist.

My head turns sideways, trying to read her expression. But the satisfaction that shone on her face so freely only moments ago is now gone. She seems closed off and surrounded by some kind of wall. I may not be able to see it, but I damn sure can feel it.

Fuck that, I think to myself. I saunter toward her and only stop once we’re standing toe to toe and she has to tilt her head backward to look up at me. My hands go to her hips and I grip her tightly, pulling her robe open in the process. I can see her rounded body through the gaping satin material and I can already feel the heat spreading to my loins. Once was definitely not enough.

I kiss her temple. “What has been going through this pretty head of yours in the time it took me to go to the bathroom and come back?”

She looks to the side. “Nothing.”

I grab the bow holding her robe on and yank one of the strings to untie it. It gapes further open and I slide it off her body until it falls to her feet. Her chest and face bloom red, and her eyes won’t meet mine. I tip her chin back to me. “Honey, I wasn’t planning on leaving.”

Her chin trembles. “I, uh, don’t normally do this. I wasn’t sure how it worked.”

“Do what?”

Frustration tinges her voice. “Ya know, sleep with someone I just met, one night stands, booty calls, whatever you want to call it.”

I gather her in my arms until our bodies are flush against each other. Although I just had her, I’m already trembling from the need to have her again. “We may have just met, but this isn’t a booty call, and it sure as hell isn’t a one-night stand.”

Hope flairs in her eyes and I kiss her perfect mouth before walking her to the bed. I help her slide under the sheets and I lie down next to her, tucking her against me until her head is resting on my chest and her legs are entangled with mine. I try to ignore my hard cock, sensing that she’s vulnerable right now. I don’t want to take advantage of her or make her think that’s all I wanted. Maybe in the beginning, at the tree farm, it was pure lust. Now, after I’ve gotten to know her and after I’ve had her, I don’t want to mess this up.

She kisses my chest and I swear I can feel my veins throbbing. I can feel her breath flare across my nipple. “Are you staying a while?”

“I’d like to, if that’s all right with you,” I answer her honestly.

Her lips kiss across my chest and she slides down my body, kissing along the way. My body is rigid with want. My

hand curls around the back of her neck, stopping her. “You don’t have to, you know.”

She looks up at me then with her big green eyes and a huge smile on her face. “I want to.”

I suck in a breath and clench my teeth when she kisses my thigh, then runs her tongue the length of my cock. I can’t take my eyes off of her. She opens her mouth and when her lips curl around my cock, sucking me in, I watch as she takes me all in and I hit the back of her throat.

“Fuck,” I throatily whisper. She has me in her hands, in her mouth and I’m completely at her mercy. “Candy, aww fuck, baby. What are you doing to me?”

When I can’t take a second more and I know I’m about to come, I put my hands under her arms and lift her up my body until she’s straddling me. She’s licking her swollen lips and her green eyes are two shades darker with longing.

She slides her wet pussy along my swollen shaft. The urge to be inside her is almost too much to bear. I grip her, stopping her gyrating hips. “I’m clean and I want nothing between us. I want to feel you and nothing else.”

A pretty flush crosses her cheeks. “I’m clean and I’m on the pill. I want that too.”

“Say it, honey. Tell me what you want,” I plead with her.

She sits up on her knees, wraps her hand around my girth and puts it at her center. “I want you, Cane. I want to feel you come inside me.”

She lowers herself slowly down my length and her tightness and warmth is like heaven. When she’s fully seated on me, I slowly let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding. “I want that too.”

Her hands on my chest, she raises herself up and down my shaft, bouncing on my cock. Pleasure soars through me and I almost come right then. I slide my hand down between us and she leans backward, putting her hands on my knees behind her. When I rub her clit with my thumb, I hear her grunt and I

stroke her while moving my hips, pushing up into her every time she is pushing down.

Her body goes taut, her gyrating slows and with her head thrown back, I still don't stop until she's climaxing and strangling my cock that's buried deep inside of her. I roar her name as complete satisfaction rages through my body. I've never felt anything like it.

When she falls down onto me, her chest heaving against mine, I turn us sideways, just enjoying having her in my arms and the tiny vibrations around my cock from our lingering orgasms.

I cup her cheek, kissing her temple. "You okay, honey?"

She smiles at me with her eyes still closed. "Never better."

Chapter 5

Candy

The next morning I'm sitting at my desk, still daydreaming about the night before. I've already put all the ornaments on the tree and it shines brightly in the window. Megan was right in having me pick out the tree. It was therapeutic for me, I think. Although I will never forget my granny, I can use the memories we had together to sustain me.

This morning I woke up to my alarm beeping that awful noise that no one can sleep through. I looked at the empty spot in the bed next to me and I lay there quietly trying to listen for any noises in the house. When I didn't hear anything, it hit me that he was gone.

A sadness overcame me then but I didn't have time to dwell on it. I had to be at work.

In between researching and answering phones, I decide I need a break.

I knock on Tom's office door. He's the only one in the office right now. He's a super great guy that has been in love with our boss since day one. He and I have become good friends and I wish that Megan felt the same way about him.

"Hey Tom, you want anything from the café?"

He shakes his head. "No, I'm getting ready to leave for a meeting. I'll see you this afternoon."

I tell him bye and walk down the street to the café to get a hot drink. Once I have my venti spiced apple cider in hand, I call my friend Sugar as I'm walking back to the office. She's

the only friend from high school that I've kept in touch with. We may not get to see each other very often, but we text and talk quite a bit.

She picks up on the second ring.

"Hey, Candy," she answers and I can hear in her voice that something is bothering her.

"What's wrong?" I ask her immediately.

"Nothing. I'm fine. What's happening? Aren't you at work?" she asks and I can tell she's trying to change the subject.

I walk into the office and see that Tom is already gone so the place is empty. "Yeah, I took a break and thought I would check in with you."

"How was your date last night?"

Damn, I forgot I'd told her about that. "Well, uh not so good, actually. He left me at the tree farm."

She interrupts me. "Are you kidding me? What an ass."

"Yeah, but well, the owner brought me home. He, was, uh, really nice." My heart starts to race just thinking about last night.

"Candy, your voice just went up five octaves. What's up with the tree farmer? Did he do some plowing last night?" She cackles into the phone at her joke.

"Ha, ha, very funny. Yeah, well he was gone before I woke up this morning, so well, ya know, whatever."

"You like this guy!" she exclaims into the phone.

"Well, as far as I can tell he meets everything on my list," I tell her matter-of-factly.

"You and your list. I tell you, it's crazy..."

I interrupt her. "Yeah, well it doesn't really matter, because he left this morning anyway. I'll probably never see him again."

Frustration flares in her voice. “Give it a chance. Not everyone is going to be perfect and abide by everything on your weird lists. Let loose a little. Just enjoy it. He’s going to call you. Don’t give up on him yet. Don’t farmers start early in the mornings?”

“You’re right, you’re right.” I laugh. “So enough about me. What’s going on with you... And before you say nothing, I know you, Sugar. Something’s wrong. Tell me.”

She’s silent for a minute, but finally she starts to talk. And instead of the strong Sugar I know, her voice is timid and unsure. “It’s Rizz. He has something going on, he’s planning something, but I don’t know what it is. It’s different this time. I’m scared, and I don’t trust him anymore.”

Her small voice guts me. Her brother Rizz is in a motorcycle club and he’s bad news. “Come stay with me, Sugar.”

“I can’t. You know he won’t let me. I’ll figure out something. Don’t worry about me. Ya know I can take care of myself.”

I sigh into the phone. “If you need me, I’ll be there for you. I hope you know that.”

“I know. Look, I have to go, but I’ll talk to you in a few days. Don’t give up on the tree farmer.”

I laugh into the phone. “Okay. I’m going to worry about you, so call me and check in, Sugar.”

We say bye and I hang up and sit down at my desk. Concern overwhelms me, but I can’t dwell on it long. The office phone rings.

“Thanks for calling Elite Accounting. This is Candy. How can I help you?”

“Hey, Candy.”

My stomach drops. His voice melts me. It’s him. It’s Cane.

“Hey, Cane.” My voice shivers.

“I’m sorry for leaving this morning without telling you bye. I had to get home early.”

“Yeah, sure, I understand. No problem,” I lie to him, because all I’ve thought about since I got up this morning was him and why he left. I would have loved to wake up in his arms.

“And, well, I didn’t have your number, so that’s why I’m calling you at work.” He clears his throat. “Will you give me your number?”

I rattle off my digits to him. Once he repeats them back to me, he asks if I’m busy tonight.

“No. I, uh, I’m free.”

“Great. Can I take you out to dinner?”

I smile into the phone. “How about I cook dinner tonight? Maybe we can stay in and watch a movie.”

His throaty chuckle turns my insides out. “I’d like that. But I don’t want you to cook after working all day. Let me bring something for dinner?”

My cheeks are hurting from my widening smile. “Okay.” I’m pretty sure he just checked another item off my list.

“Okay, so action movie? Romance? Thriller? Comedy? What do you want to watch?” he asks.

“Uh, anything but scary. I don’t like scary,” I admit to him.

“Okay, sounds good, so around six? Is that okay with you?”

“That’s perfect.”

He clears his throat. “And Candy, I’ll make it up to you.”

My forehead creases. “Make what up to me?”

“Leaving you in bed this morning without kissing you bye.” His throaty voice holds so much promise in that one statement.

“I’d like that.” My hand covers my heart as if to stop the fluttering.

Cane

I'm standing on her front porch with a bag of food in one hand, the wreath she left in my truck from the night before under my arm and a movie in my jacket pocket. I knock on the front door and wait. Time has gone surprising slowly today. It's like I was counting down the minutes until I could see her and have her in my arms again.

She opens the door and I take in her bare feet, red painted toes, black leggings and long black sweater that is hanging off one shoulder. We stand there, just smiling at each other, before she says, "Hi," takes the wreath from me and then backs up and opens the door for me to enter.

"Hi, honey." I lean in to kiss her lips and her arms go around my neck. I'm wishing I didn't have the bag in my hand, but I still encircle her with one arm. When we pull back, I whisper against her mouth between kisses, "I missed you too."

She giggles, takes my free hand and leads me into the kitchen. Setting the food on the table, I turn to her and she's standing on her tiptoes reaching for the plates. I take off my jacket and hang it over a chair. I come up behind her and press my already hard cock at the crevice of her ass and reach up to grab them for her. Her hands go to the countertop and she presses her ass against me.

"Are you hungry?" I ask her, kissing along her neck.

She turns in my arms, wrapping her hands around my neck and pulling me down to her. "I can wait. I want you right now."

I make quick work of pulling her leggings and underwear off, then her shirt and bra. When she's naked before me and her chest is already heaving uncontrollably, I grip her hips and set her up on the edge of the counter. Her legs drop open wide and I fit myself between them. My cock is pressing hard against my zipper and I pull my jeans and underwear down in one fell swoop.

I stroke myself, looking at her wet, glistening slit. Her eyes are hooded, staring back at me. "I've thought about this, about you, all day," I admit before entering her slowly. Her head falls back, but I grip the back of her neck, pulling her face back up so I can see it. I need to see her eyes when she comes undone.

I kiss her lips before telling her, "Keep your eyes on me, baby. I need to see your eyes when you're coming all over my cock."

The heated gaze she is giving me about makes me lose control. I focus all my efforts on her, on making her feel good. I stroke her clit with my thumb as I pound into her. She wraps her legs around me and I bring her closer to the counter's edge, moving in and out of her. When she tightens on my hardness, I increase the pressure of my hand on her nub and slowly stroke her insides with my cock.

"Cane..." She moans my name, all the while with her eyes on me.

I can see the desire in their depths and the emotion filling her face. It's almost too much, this unspoken connection between us. I'm filling her up and our gazes are trained on each other. "Come for me, baby. I need to come but I want you on my cock when I do. Milk me, baby."

As if on command, her legs squeeze into my hips, putting them into a vise grip. I don't stop though; I keep penetrating her until she's pushed over the edge and she's coming in my arms.

My orgasm rips through me and a guttural moan leaves my lips, but I still don't take my eyes off her.

When our breathing comes back to normal, I lean in and kiss the lone tear that escaped down her cheek. I don't ask her about it. I don't have to. I know it was intense, and her emotions are on edge. Hell, I felt the same thing.

Chapter 6

Candy

My night is going better than I ever expected. The best sex I ever had, a smorgasbord of Chinese food and a romantic comedy on television. I'm wrapped up in Cane's arms as we watch the credits go by. I turn the movie off and a television show comes on. I lower the volume and lay back in his arms.

"There's something we probably need to talk about, Candy," he murmurs against my temple.

"Uh, sure. Do you want something to drink?" I ask him.

"No, I'm fine. I just think there's something you need to know about me... well, something you should know."

I roll my eyes. "I've freaked you out because of my list. My friend Sugar told me it was crazy and she's probably right. I never should have told you about it."

I sit sideways on the couch and face him.

He holds on to my hand and I lace our fingers together. "You didn't freak me out. Tell me more about it. What's all on it?"

I shake my head.

"C'mon, I want to know." He leans over and kisses me.

"Well, let's see. Handsome, kind, funny, happy, likes to help people." The more I name off my list, the more I realize that he fits everything. "Let's see, well, single, of course, no kids."

"You don't want kids?" he interrupts.

“No. I mean, yeah, I do. Eventually. Just not right now,” I assure him shyly. I’m beginning to see that this is getting more and more personal.

“Oh” is all he says as he leans back in the cushion.

I know I should never have brought up the stupid list. He’s now probably thinking I’m trying to saddle him into forever.

“What were you going to tell me?” I snuggle into his chest.

He’s quiet for a moment and then looks down into my face. “Oh, uh, I was going to break it to you that my favorite movies are action movies. I didn’t want to get your hopes up that we would always be watching romantic comedies.”

I laugh at him, kiss his lips and tell him, “I think I can handle it.”

The rest of the night we sit there and talk about our days. I tell him about my friend Sugar and how I’m worried about her. He tells me about a new app he’s working on. He doesn’t talk a lot about his family, but I figure I shouldn’t push him on it. I’m one that definitely understands family and heartache and don’t want to bring up any sad memories for him.

He’s a little more reserved since our talk about the list and I’m afraid that I’ve freaked him out. I spend the rest of the night keeping things fun and flirty.

“So I’m thinking that you need a Christmas tree in here.” He chuckles, looking over into the empty corner. I cleaned a space for the tree; I just haven’t got one yet.

I shrug my shoulders. “Yeah, well, Christmas Eve is in two days. It would be a waste now at this point.”

His arms tighten around me. “I disagree. Even if we just put lights on it, I think a little Christmas cheer would be good for you. Your granny would want that for you, honey.”

I nod thoughtfully. “I know.”

He kisses me again, and then leans up to put his boots back on. “Do you work tomorrow?”

I'm watching him tie his laces. It's late, but I had hoped he would spend the night. I swallow through the closing of my throat. "Yeah, a half day."

"How about I come get you and we go to the farm to pick you out a tree?" He pulls me up from the couch and holds both of my hands in his.

I start to nod, but then stop. "There's no reason for you to pick me up. I can just drive out there."

He's already shaking his head. "No. It's supposed to snow tomorrow. I'd rather just pick you up to know you're safe."

His arms are wrapped around me and a shiver goes through my body at his possessive words. I finally nod my agreement and he bends down to kiss me. "I hate that I have to leave. We'll be busy the next few days and I had to get someone to cover for me to come over tonight."

"It's fine, no big deal."

"It is though. I would love to wake up with you in my arms, honey." He hugs me tightly and places a kiss on my temple. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I stand in the open doorway with the cold breeze brushing my bare arms. I watch until his truck disappears down the road.

Cane

Driving home, loneliness and a heavy heart fills me. I should have told her. I know I should have, but fear that she would turn me away stopped me. I know that I could never be with someone that didn't want or wasn't ready for kids so I should have just told her and left. The only thing is – I couldn't do it. I couldn't walk away from her.

When I get home, the front door of the house opens and little legs start running toward me. I bend down, laughing as I pull Mason up into my arms.

"Hey, son, what are you doing home? I figured you and your mom would be at the ski lodge right now."

My ex-wife and I share custody of our son. He is everything to me. He's five years old and he's been my whole world since the day he was born. We alternate holidays and this Christmas was his mom's turn.

"I told Mom I wanted to be at the tree farm for Christmas," he says matter-of-factly.

I cringe. I bet Stacy didn't like that. "What did Mom say?"

"Oh you know, she packed everything up and drove the few hours to the tree farm. I couldn't deny him." She is standing in the open doorway watching us.

"I'm sorry, Stacy," I tell her honestly. I know that probably upset her. She had planned this trip for a while.

"Oh, it's okay. I like the tree farm too. Anyway, I'm going to the hotel and if it's okay with you, I'll be back tomorrow. I thought we could share this Christmas."

"Yippee!" Mason hollers before jumping from my arms to his mom's.

"Of course, yes. That would be great!" I tell her honestly. It was rough for awhile, but it's been almost four years since the divorce and we have worked through most of our bad history together. We are friends now.

"Great!" She kisses Mason and sets him on the ground. "See you boys tomorrow then."

"Dad, can I have some hot cocoa?" Mason asks before running into the house.

I follow him a little slower. Thoughts of Candy fill my head. This is definitely going to change things.

Chapter 7

Candy

I've been looking forward to going to the tree farm since last night. Until I got the text from Cane telling me that he had something come up and needed to stay at the tree farm. I volunteered to drive out to help him, but with the snow coming down, he didn't want me to risk it.

"What's happened to you since this morning?" Tom asks, leaning against the door to his office.

I shrug my shoulders at him. I try to smile but I know he can tell it's fake.

He walks over to my desk. "C'mon, Candy, you were all smiles this morning. Now you look like you've lost your best friend."

I look up at him and my eyes tear up. I can't help it. I thought this was going to be a great Christmas Eve. Now it looks like I'll be spending it alone again. "Cane was going to come and get me to go to the tree farm, but he can't get away."

"Well, you can't spend Christmas Eve alone. Let me take you out there," he offers. "I need to get my mom a wreath anyway. I can just drop you off."

I stare at him, wondering if it's really that easy. "Are you sure you don't mind? I could drive."

"Not in your car with this snow coming down. I promise, I don't mind at all. Let's go ahead and close up shop."

I start shutting down my computer and putting everything away. I can't wait to surprise Cane. I'm actually excited to

help out at the tree farm. I'm waiting on Tom and I pull my phone out and send Sugar a text.

Hey, I'm just checking in. Call me or text me. Let me know you're okay. Merry Christmas!

I wait for her to respond. Usually she gets right back to me. I'm worried about her and I don't know what I can do to help her. I hope she responds soon.

When Tom walks out of his office, asking if I'm ready to go, I put my phone away and follow him out to his truck.

Tom drives me out to the tree farm and when we park, he helps me down from his truck and we walk into the entrance. Cane sees us immediately.

Cane stops before he gets to me. I can see the hesitancy on his face, and I'm a little surprised by it. He's eyeing Tom and I'm quick to make introductions. "Cane, this is Tom. We work together. He offered to bring me over to help you today."

As I introduce them, I walk away from Tom's side and stand next to Cane. He holds his hand out and shakes it, thanking him for bringing me.

"He's going to pick up his mom a wreath while he's there," I explain further, still not sure what to make of Cane being so subdued.

"Great. Pick whichever one you want. It's on the house. Thanks for bringing my girl to me." He puts his arm around me and tugs me to him.

Tom's eyebrows raise, but he merely nods approvingly. "Sure, anytime. Candy knows I'd do anything for her."

Tom winks at me and tells me he'll see me after Christmas before walking off. Cane's hand grips me tighter. When I look up at him, he asks me, "Friends, huh?"

"Yes, just friends. He's in love with our boss," I assure him.

"That's good, honey, 'cause I have to admit, when you walked in with him, I didn't like it."

I interrupt him. "He offered to give me a ride."

He nods. "I know, and I appreciate it, but I still don't like it."

His arms go around me and grip my lower back, pulling me against him. I should probably be bothered with how possessive he is, but I can't get the smile off my face, because I actually love his overprotective ways.

I go up on my tiptoes, reaching for him. "Kiss me, Cane."

"With pleasure, honey."

His lips press against mine. I wrap my arms around his neck, trying to get as close to him as I can when we both have on bulky jackets. My mouth opens, granting him access, and his tongue sweeps through my mouth. My heart beats triple-time, and even though it's cold out, heat fills me. He pulls me up until my feet are barely touching the ground. I turn my head to the side, deepening the kiss, and I feel almost dizzy with all the surreal sensations traveling through my body.

"DAD'S KISSING A GIRL! I'm going to go tell Mom!" I hear a scream from beside us and I rip my lips from Cane. When I look to where the noise come from, I see a little boy running away as fast as his little legs will carry him.

I gasp and jerk out of his arms, landing on my feet with a thud. "You're married! You have a kid!"

He reaches for me, but I jerk from his grasp.

"Candy, wait," he pleads. "It's not what you think."

I shake my head. I feel almost sick to my stomach and pain fills my heart. I start walking toward the entrance, hoping and praying that Tom hasn't left yet. Wouldn't that be something, getting trapped at the tree farm again?

When I walk to the parking lot, his truck is already gone. I pull out my phone and open the Uber app.

Cane comes out behind me, holding out a hand. "Candy, you have to listen to me. Just let me explain."

I twirl around and can't stop the tears rolling down my cheeks. I yell at him, hatred filling my voice. "No. I should have known you were too good to be true. You're a cheater, Cane. And a liar. And I don't ever want to see you again."

He stares back at me and if I wasn't so mad, so heartbroken, the look on his face would have me softening.

He responds in a soft voice, void of any emotion. "Uber is not going to come out here in this snow. I'll have someone bring around a truck to take you home."

He turns on his heel and walks back into the tree farm, leaving me standing in the falling snow.

I wipe at the tears on my cheeks and take a few deep breaths, trying to calm my sobbing. When a truck pulls into the parking spot next to me, a woman rolls down her window. "Get in, honey. I'll take you home."

I struggle to climb up into the cab of the truck and can't help but wonder why nobody seems to have any normal-sized vehicles around here. I no sooner put my seatbelt on than we are pulling out onto the main road.

"Thanks for taking me. I live downtown," I tell her. The woman is beautiful. Even under her bulky jacket, I can tell she's thin. Her blond hair is peeking out of her toboggan and her blue eyes are expressive.

"Yea, Cane told me where you lived," she says before she turns to me and smiles.

And when she smiles, it hits me. "Oh my God. You're his wife, aren't you?"

I put my head down in my hands, trying to figure out what I did to deserve this. I mumble to her apologetically, "I promise I didn't know he was married."

"Probably because he's not." She grins. "I'm his ex-wife. We've been divorced for four years."

"Ex-wife?" I ask, wanting to make sure I heard her right.

She nods. "I cheated on him. It was the worst mistake I've ever made in my life. But we've worked through it. We're

friends now. Well, as much as we can be.”

Oh my God, she cheated on him... and I just called him a cheater.

“And you have a son together?” I ask, trying to figure it all out.

“Yes, Mason. Have you not met Mason?” she asks me.

I shake my head, and when I remember she’s not looking at me, she’s concentrating on the road, I mumble, “No, I didn’t know about him. Why wouldn’t he have told me?”

She’s quiet for a minute. “Now, I’m not sure about that. Mason is everything to him. I’m a little surprised he didn’t tell you either.”

I go back through all of our conversations, trying to see if he ever hinted at it, but I know I would have remembered that. I think back to our conversation last night, and I remember telling him about my “Mr. Right” list and wanting a man without any kids. *Oh my God*, I totally fucked all of this up.

The cab of the truck is silent the rest of the drive. I point to my house and she pulls into the driveway. I turn to her, thanking her for the ride, and she stops me from getting out by reaching over and touching my shoulder.

She stares at me for a minute, and I can tell she’s trying to see what kind of person I am. “Honey, if you feel anything for him at all, he’s worth it. I know he was really hurt by whatever y’all were fighting about. I don’t know or understand everything that’s going on, but I do know he’s a great man and a great father. You can’t just throw something like that away.”

I inhale deeply, trying not to cry, not sure how I’m going to fix this. “Thank you. For the ride, and well, everything.”

“Sure, honey. No problem.” I start to shut the door, but I stop when she says, “Cane volunteers at the soup kitchen on Christmas every year, so he’ll be there tomorrow morning.”

She smiles with a gleam in her eyes. I nod, shut the door and walk into my empty house.

Cane

I stand in the entrance of the tree farm watching my ex-wife pull out of the parking lot with Candy in the passenger seat. She had struggled to get into the truck and I had to force myself to stay put and not go over to help her.

Mason tugs on my pant leg. “Hey, Daddy! Where’d your girlfriend go?”

I bend over and lift him up on my hip. “She had to go home.”

He nods his head, like he’s got it all figured out. “Oh, she had to go be with her family for Christmas Eve, didn’t she? Will I get to meet her, Dad?”

His words gut me, because I know she’s not going home to family. She’s going home to an empty house and no one. I know how hard Christmas is for her, but I also know she doesn’t want to see me. She made that perfectly clear.

Chapter 8

Candy

I stand outside the soup kitchen wringing my hands, nervousness coming over me.

When I finally get up enough nerve, I walk in and instantly my eyes are drawn to Cane spooning up mashed potatoes and putting them onto the plate of the man standing in front of him. The smile he has for the man and every person after him melts my heart, but also makes me remember all the nasty things I said to him.

“Hey, you were the one kissing my dad yesterday.”

I look over at the voice and the little boy from the tree farm is standing there with a rag, wiping down a table. He walks over and stares up at me.

“Uh, yeah, that was me,” I tell him.

“Cool. Are you going to spend Christmas with us?”

“Uh...” I start, but before I can answer, I see Cane walking toward us.

He bends down and puts his arm around his son’s shoulder. “Hey, buddy, Joseph is in the back and says he has some extra chocolate chip cookies if you want any.”

“Yippee!” he hollers and takes off running.

“No running,” Cane calls out to him.

His son slows down, but barely.

“What are you doing here, Candy?” He stands back up and turns to me.

I'm so happy to see him, but I know he's still mad at me. I can't say that I blame him.

I tug on the bottom of my jacket. "I wanted to come and tell you that I was sorry. I shouldn't have said what I said to you yesterday."

He hesitates briefly, then admits slowly, "I should have told you I had a kid."

I tilt my head to the side. "Why didn't you?"

He grimaces and slightly shakes his head. "I wanted to. I tried to. That's what I was going to talk to you about, but then we started talking about your 'list' and you said you didn't want kids now. I should have told you right then. But I figured that would've run you off... So pure selfishness kept me from telling you."

I shake my head. That damn list. It's done me more harm than good!

I look at the door that his son ran through. "How old is he?"

He smiles wistfully. "He's five going on twenty-five."

"He seems like a great kid. Did he get upset about us kissing?" I worried about that all night. I know kids can get upset about stuff like that.

He blows out a breath. "No. He was upset that you left. He was hoping you were going to spend Christmas Eve with us... I was too."

I cringe. "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say."

There are several people sitting around us, but in my mind, it's only me and Cane. He takes a step toward me, but there's still a wide space between us. "Can I ask you a question?"

I bite my lip, and then nod my head.

His hand grips the chair back next to him. "Do you not want a man with a kid because you can't imagine loving one that wasn't your own?"

"No, God no! Of course not," I tell him adamantly.

I look down at his hand and his knuckles are white from clinching onto the chair. “Then why? Why do you have on your list that you don’t want a man with a child?”

A tear rolls down my cheek and I wipe it away before I mutter to him, “Because I’m afraid they couldn’t love me.”

He releases the chair and steps toward me. “That’s crazy. How could they not love you?”

My eyes drop to the floor in front of me. “Because my own parents don’t love me. How could a child that’s not even mine love me?”

Cane

I reach out and cup her shoulder. “Oh, honey.”

She won’t look at me and I can feel her body trembling under my hand. I can only imagine what she’s been through. I want to kiss her and hold her to me, assure her that we can work this out.

A commotion from the kitchen has me looking that way. It sounds as if a bunch of pots and pans have fallen. Mason opens the door and hollers, “Dad, we need you in here!”

“I’ll be right back, Candy.” I hate to leave her with the look of despair on her face. “I’ll be right back.”

She nods and I take off jogging to the kitchen. I help pick up everything on the floor and then tell them I’ll be right back. I take Mason by the hand and walk out to the dining hall to introduce him to Candy, but she’s gone. I look out into the parking lot, but her car is not there.

I take a deep breath and then go back to my station at the serving line.

Two hours later, I have Mason belted into the truck and I finally have a plan. Mason’s mom spent Christmas Eve with him and came over early this morning to see him open presents. I have him the rest of the day.

We go to the tree farm and I let Mason pick out a tree. I grab the leftovers from Christmas Eve, clothes for Mason and

me, and the present I got Candy and load everything into the truck.

It only takes us an hour before we're back on the road, headed to Candy's house.

We pull into the driveway, and I help Mason out of the truck.

When Candy opens the door, she gasps at seeing us on her porch.

She's staring at us, and I can tell she's happy to see us.

"Merry Christmas!" Mason yells, jumping up and down, all excited.

His excitement is contagious and I laugh at his antics. I put my hand on the door frame. "Can we come in?"

She's still staring at Mason, but she opens the door farther. "Of course. Please come in."

Mason runs into the house. "I'll be right back. I have some stuff to carry in."

She smiles at me and follows Mason into the house. I make several trips bringing everything inside and when I'm finally done, I come to a halt when I see Mason sitting cross legged next to Candy on the rug. There's a video game on the tv that they're both playing.

The racing game has them both squealing and when Mason ends up the victor, he jumps up and turns around to me. "Dad, Candy has the best game. Please, please, please can we get me one?"

Candy smiles over at me, and in that smile, I realize that everything is going to be okay. She ruffles Mason's hair. "You can have this one, if your dad's okay with it. I hardly ever play it."

She looks at me questioningly and with a little worry on her face, like maybe she overstepped.

Mason's already jumping up and down. "Can I, Dad? Can I?"

Laughing, I walk over to him and squat down in front of him. “How about when you come over here you can play it?”

Mason starts to say something, but I finish by telling him, “We’ll be spending a lot of time here or Candy will be coming to our house. So we’ll see where we are most of the time and figure it out then. Okay?”

He jumps up and down. “Yes!”

I look at Candy out of the corner of my eye. She’s smiling from ear to ear and I know right then that I made the right decision. Even though I’d sworn off relationships, I’m happy that I took a chance on her.

I pick up the tree that I laid down behind the couch. “So, now, it looks like we have a tree to put up! Where do you want it?”

She jumps up and down, clapping her hands together. “You got me a tree?”

I stand it up next to me and hold it with one hand. I encircle her waist with my other arm and bring her close to me. “I thought since this is going to be our first Christmas together, the first of many, we should have a Christmas tree.”

And because I can’t wait a second longer, I bend down and kiss her lips softly.

Chapter 9

Candy

I thought that I was going to be alone for Christmas. I was sad, but I was prepared for it. Now I'm sitting on the couch with Cane's arm around me and Mason's asleep already with his head on my lap. My fingers are stroking through his hair, and I can't help but smile at how fun today was.

We put lights on the tree and Cane helped me find my granny's box of ornaments and we put those up. We ate a full Christmas dinner and Mason and I played around twenty racing games on the video game player. Cane gave me a Christmas present and it was a beautiful ornament that had our names, including Mason's, and the words "*First Christmas*" on it.

Now the house is silent and we're sitting here with only the lights from the tree illuminating the room.

I turn toward Cane, as much as I can without disturbing Mason. Looking into his eyes, I lean in and softly kiss him. "Thank you, Cane. This has been the best Christmas. And it's all because of you and Mason."

The side of his mouth lifts up. "So I guess I checked off everything on your 'Mr. Right' list?"

My face heats. That stupid list. "I don't need that list to tell me how I feel."

"Oh yeah? How do you feel?" he asks.

"Happy, blessed, loved..." Oh my God, I just said that out loud. "I mean..."

“No, you can’t take it back. You should feel loved, Candy. I love you. And I know Mason is going to love you, if he doesn’t already.”

I gasp, staring at him. “You love me?”

He nods and kisses my temple.

“I love you, too, Cane. I know it’s quick, but already I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

I lay my head down on his chest and I hear the steady beat of his heart. He wraps me closer to him and right now, I can’t imagine my life getting any better.

Cane

We sit and watch the lights on the Christmas tree twinkle for a while before I finally pick up Mason and carry him to the guest room. When I come out, Candy’s standing in the doorway watching us.

I grab her hand and walk with her to her bedroom. As soon as I get the door closed, I start removing her clothes and don’t stop until all of her curvy body is naked in front of me. I undress quickly and lay her back on the bed.

I take my time, cherishing every inch of her and when I finally line my hard cock up at her core, I enter her slowly, not taking my eyes off hers. The image of her underneath me with lust in her eyes has me thinking of our future. I can easily picture her on our wedding day dressed all in white, or her rounded with our baby. That image alone has my thrusts deepening and I groan uncontrollably.

I don’t stop until I’ve satisfied her and with every orgasm I give her, I tell her how much I love her.

Afterwards, she drifts off to sleep and I hold her in my arms, counting my blessings.

When I wake up, I kiss her, get out of bed and go to the kitchen to make some pancakes and bacon.

When Candy strolls in with her hair in a bun, leggings covering her legs and my T-shirt on, I almost set her up on the counter and have her for breakfast.

“Morning, baby,” I tell her before touching my lips to hers.

Her face lights up, making me realize I need to call her baby more often. “Morning.”

“Is that pancakes?” Mason is wiping his eyes in the doorway of the kitchen.

I kiss her one more time and then turn to my son. “It sure is, buddy. Have a seat.”

He climbs into the chair next to Candy and smiles real big at her. “I like your house, Candy. Do you think I can sleep over again sometime? Maybe we can play some more games.”

I put the pancakes onto a serving plate and turn back to the table. As I set them down between the two people I love most in this world, I can’t help but smile when I see Candy’s chin quiver with emotion.

She takes a deep breath and huskily tells him, “I would love that, Mason.”

I sit down at the table with them and in between belly laughing at Mason, and stolen kisses with Candy, I enjoy my breakfast while planning out the future in my head.

Epilogue

Candy

Ten Years Later

I never dreamed this could be my life. Cane covers my hand that is resting on his thigh. He has our youngest, one-year-old Cane Jr. – or CJ as we call him—lying on his shoulder sleeping through all of the noise.

Mason, who is fifteen now and just got his learners' permit, sits on the other side of me. I turn to look at him and he's watching his younger sister, five-year-old Brandy, standing on the stage singing at the top of her lungs in the school's Christmas concert. The pride he has for her shines on his face. I was worried in the beginning how we could make this work. But it was never an issue. Mason accepted me since day one. I know it doesn't always happen like that, so I'm blessed to have a stepson like him. I won't say it was always easy, but I can tell you that Mason and I love each other. I may not be his mom, but I love him as if I am.

Cane squeezes my hand and I look over at him. He leans over and whispers in my ear, "She's beautiful, just like her momma."

A heated blush fills my face. This man still does it for me. We've been married almost ten years now, having gotten married the summer after we met.

He loves me every day. And every Christmas he tries to make better than the last. He spoils me. Oh, how I wish my granny could have met him. She would've loved him.

I follow Cane out of the gym with our kids surrounding us and I can't help but notice the other women looking at him. In the beginning, I would feel insecure and jealous when that happened. But after years of Cane telling and showing me how much he loves me, I don't even question it now. It also helps that he doesn't even notice other women, no matter how obvious they are. The only thing he has eyes for is me and our family.

Cane

Pulling into the house at the tree farm, I carry in CJ and get him ready for bed. Candy fixes Brandy and Mason a snack while Brandy bends their ear with stories of her concert. When the house finally quiets down and I have my wife in bed, I reach under the covers and pull out her present.

"Cane, Christmas is a few days away," she admonishes me. But I always give her her gifts early.

She's lying on her side and I set it on the bed between us. "I know, but I wanted you to have this. And I wanted to give it to you when it was just the two of us."

She looks at the pretty red wrapping and I know she realizes that I didn't wrap it. "I even had them wrap it for me so you could get into it." I tend to put too much tape on it, almost making it impossible to rip into.

She lifts it up gingerly and starts opening it. When she removes the wrapper and opens the tiny box, she gasps at the delicate locket lying inside.

"Open it," I encourage her.

She opens the locket, and inside is a picture of her granny. The same portrait she has setting on our mantle.

Her eyes fill with tears. "I love it, Cane. This is perfect."

"She would be so proud of you, honey. I know Christmas is still hard for you without her. I thought this way you could still keep her close."

She sits up. "Will you put it on me?"

I sit up and move her hair to the side and clasp the locket around her neck.

She touches her fingers to it and turns to me. “How does it look?”

I tell her honestly, “Beautiful. I’ve never seen anyone more beautiful than you look right now.”

Her face lights up, but then she grimaces. “But Cane, what can I get you? You get me the best gifts. What can I get you that you don’t already have?”

She has no idea that since the day I’ve met her, I have had everything that I need.

I look at her beautiful face, her red hair and green sparkling eyes. My gaze goes down her body, taking in her curves. “You, honey. All I need is you.”

I lean in and kiss her, sliding her underneath of me and make sweet love to my wife... my everything.

Epilogue 2

Cane

Ten Years Later

T wenty years I've been married to the love of my life. Our life is a lot different than it used to be. For one, we are running the Christmas Tree Farm as a family, and Candy no longer works at the office downtown. No, the Tree Farm now has its own accountant on the inside.

Which is great for business, but not so great for my sanity sometimes. Every now and then, she comes out of her office and works with customers. When I saw her come out this morning in her cherry red sweater and a glint in her eye, I knew there would be problems today, and I've been on edge ever since.

Mason and his girlfriend are home from college and are helping out at the farm today along with CJ and Brandy. It's great having all the family home for the holidays.

It's almost closing time when Mason comes over to me. "Dad, you want me to take care of that?"

I stack some more firewood and turn to him. "Take care of what, Mason?"

He points to the other side of the farm where the wreaths and décor are sold. I turn to where he's pointing, and Candy is up on a ladder moving wreaths around. That's not the problem, though. It's the man standing behind her with his arms crossed over his chest. I shake my head because I know what's about to happen. Candy starts to come down the ladder, and the man

steps forward. He reaches out, and I know he's planning to put his hands on her hips.

Ignoring my son's request, I all but run to the wreath area. I don't want to yell and risk scaring my wife, causing her to fall, but I sure as hell don't want another man's hands on her, either. As soon as I'm close, I get the other man's attention. "Hey! Hey, you."

He doesn't act as if he hears me, and when I get next to him, I step between him and my wife. I put my hands on her waist more forcefully than I should, but I help her down the ladder and wrap both arms around her. Without even looking at the man, I gather Candy in my arms and walk her to the back, where her office is. I all but run through the door and slam it behind us. "Your job is in here. This is where you work."

Fuck, I know as soon as the words leave my mouth I shouldn't have said it like that. Candy's face is red. "Cane, what is your problem? You may be my husband, but you don't tell me where I can and can't work on OUR farm."

I take a deep breath and then another, pacing back and forth. I stop and throw a hand up. "Do you realize every time you work out there, I have to deal with some asshole that thinks he can talk to you, flirt with you or like today—he almost touched you. I would have killed him, Candy."

She looks at me innocently, but there is a spark in her eyes. "I hadn't noticed."

It's the tone of her voice that has me second-guessing myself. She may be trying to pull off the innocent look, but I'm not buying it. "Candy...."

She smiles up at me, and it's then I know. I move toward her in one motion, lifting her by the waist and setting her on top of her desk. Her legs widen, and I fit myself right between them. Her hands are gripping my waist. "You know, don't you? You know every time you come out there and I have to deal with some asshole... you know what's coming next, don't you? Is that why you do it? You like me being an alpha caveman? You like me claiming what's mine?"

She shrugs her shoulders as she slides her hands under my shirt and up my chest. "I like knowing that after twenty years, you still want me."

I suck in a breath. "I don't care if it's thirty, forty, or fifty years from now... I will always want you. You're mine, Candy."

At this point, my breaths are coming in pants. I know the only thing that's going to calm me, and that is to have her completely wrapped around me while I bury my seed inside her. I lean in, kissing her cheek and then her earlobe. In a husky voice, I tell her, "You know what I need, and I'm not going to wait. I'm going to have you right here."

She mewls and scoots closer to the edge of the desk. I undo my pants and pull my hard cock out. Precum is already dripping from my tip.

I help her stand up and pull her pants and panties down to her hips in one swoop before I lift her in my arms. "Cane, I'm too—"

I cut her off because I know what she's going to say. "Don't say it, Candy. The only thing I want to hear from you right now is 'Yes, Cane.'"

She wraps her hand around my hard cock. "Yes, Cane!"

I set her naked ass back on the desk and position myself at her entrance. In one thrust, I'm inside her to the hilt. "Fuck, yeah."

"Please, please..."

I know what she wants, and I put my hand between us. I'm not going to last long. I never do when she does me this way, but I'll make sure she comes as long as she comes on my dick.

I strum my fingers over her swollen clit, and she tilts her hips to give me better access. "Come for me, Candy."

Her whole body flexes as the orgasm rolls through her body. Her pussy spasms, sucking me in to her hot, wet center. I let myself go and bury my face into her neck as I grunt my release. It's not until I have her arousal covering me that I'm

able to breathe a little easier. I know it sounds ridiculous. We've been together for twenty years, and there's no doubt that she's mine. But I say it anyway. "Mine. You're mine."

She lets out a sigh of satisfaction. "Always yours."

Mason

Mail Order Brides For Christmas

Chapter 1

Mia

Last Christmas was the first one I spent without my parents, and I promised myself that by the next one I'd have someone to spend the holidays with. I've been in a mood lately, unsure of what I need to do but knowing that I need to do something. With Christmas not too far away, I've taken a look at my life and am sad to see what a lonely existence I've been living since I lost my parents. It is time to do something. Something drastic.

I can't keep doing the same thing day in and day out. Get up, go to work at my job as a cashier at the local Piggly Wiggly, come home, watch television, and go to bed just to get up and do it all again.

Sure, I probably shouldn't have had a few drinks. Especially since I was under the drinking age and had to use a fake ID to get them. And I probably shouldn't have made such a big decision for my life after having said drinks. But it's too late to back out now. I signed the paperwork. Of course, I could probably get out of it. Say I was under the influence when I signed them or something. But I don't want to. The more I've thought about it, the surer I've become. And besides, it worked for my parents. So why can't it work for me?

Of course it was a different time and circumstances then. My mom and dad were promised to each other before they even met. Their families wanted to join. My dad's family wanted to join with my mother's family's land. It was the seventies then, so things like that weren't common. The days

of arranged marriages were something of the past, or at least I thought so, and so did my mom and dad. And my mom told me that she was going to refuse her parents and tell them no, that getting married was not an option, they needed to find another way. But as soon as she laid eyes on my dad, she knew she would go through with it. My dad felt the same way. They both told me it was love at first sight. They were married almost twenty-six years, and even though it was devastating that I lost them both at the same time, in my heart I knew it was for the best. Their love was one for the ages. Neither would have wanted to be without the other. They were two halves of a whole, and from the moment they married, they never spent more than a night apart. If one had survived the car accident, it would have been too much for the other to bear.

So now here I am, alone in this world. I have the wineries all in my name, but I don't work there. I haven't been able to bring myself to go there, not since the accident. The winery was sort of like my parents' other child. They loved it, and everything they created there was amazing. They left it to me, and I know what a special gift it is, but I haven't been able to go there. I receive my monthly royalty payment automatically deposited into my account, but I don't touch it.

I look at my packed bags sitting on the floor next to my chair. There are people everywhere, arriving and departing, everyone in a hurry to get somewhere. I like to imagine what each person is doing, what their life story is. The man across the way keeps looking at me curiously, and I wonder if he's wondering the same about me. I laugh to myself. There's no way he could guess that I'm a mail-order bride on my way to meet my future husband.

In the light of day and sobered up, I am waiting for the regret to set in. I signed up online with a matrimony matching website, Mail Order Brides for Christmas. The call from Holly Huckleberry to be interviewed via Skype was definitely interesting as I learned all the ins and outs of being a mail order bride. But what sold me on the idea was talking with Joy Mistletoe. She is my husband-to-be's mother. She wanted to speak to me before I signed any papers. Joy was warm and

excited. She reminded me so much of my own mother that I probably would have promised her anything she wanted. She told me that I would be a perfect fit for her son and their family.

I try to recall everything she said, and I can remember her telling me that she has six sons who own their own businesses, and they are all special guys that have found themselves in a time crunch situation. I know she mentioned the name Mason, and I try to remember exactly what the reason was he needed to get married, but the hangover and too much alcohol has caused my brain to be frazzled.

I look at my phone again and read all the reviews for the matrimony matching website. It seems legit. Darn, I hope it is. I told my friend that I had met someone online. If I told her I was getting married to someone I hadn't even met, heck hadn't even talked to, I know she would have tried to talk me out of it. And I don't want that.

Anyone else would probably be worried right now, wondering if this is the right thing to do. But not me. When I woke up this morning, I felt refreshed and without the least amount of worry. I expected some remorse or regrets, but I feel a calm come over me about the whole thing. I feel like leaving my lonely life behind to go and begin a new one surrounded by family is fate taking a hand.

As I hear the call to board over the loudspeakers, I grab my bag and start to walk across the aisle. The man that is sitting across from me stands up and waves for me to go in front of him. I smile easily at him and show the attendant my boarding pass before walking on to the plane. As I settle into my assigned seat, I think, *This is going to be just like a fairy tale.*

Mason

I'm staring at the paperwork in front of me, reading through it all. I shouldn't even question it. The prenuptial agreement was prepared by Mr. Davis, our family's lawyer for the last twenty

years. He's trustworthy and knows his stuff. It has all the common information on it and includes the clause that we each take what was ours with us when we get divorced. I've tattooed over too many ex-lovers' names on countless clients to be naïve enough to think that anything real can come of this arranged marriage.

I still can't believe that my mother set this whole thing up. As soon as she learned about the Titan Corporation coming in to buy the town, she's been searching to find a way to stop it. We all have. But Mother took it into her own hands. She's really clever and probably one of the most headstrong women I know. She came up with this idea, contacted the mail-order bride company, and put everything into motion.

The rules for the town's ownership are clear and say I have to be married. I'm working on a clause. Something we can figure out about changing the antiquated laws of Snow Valley. Phew! It's crazy. The law states that the owners must be married. It's a crazy idea, and the rules definitely need changed. Until I can figure it out, we will stay married.

Snow Valley means so much to our community and my family, and I know there's no way I can let the Titan Corporation come in and buy it. We don't want a tourist town. We like our town the way it is. My brothers and I are prepared to buy it, but the city bylaws say that the town's owners have to be married. I think it's a bunch of hogwash, but there's no way I'm telling my mother no. I won't be the one to let my family down, not when my five brothers all agreed to do this. Plus, I'm not so worried about the idea that I would stay married if it turns out really badly. If it comes down to it, I'll figure out a loophole of selling my shares of the town or something. As long as the majority stays in the Mistletoe family, I won't need to be an owner.

Marriage really isn't for me anyway. I don't believe in happily ever afters. My buddies in the service would agree with me. My best friend's wife left him while he was serving overseas. Another friend's wife divorced him because she fell in love with someone else. Another friend's wife left him because she couldn't handle him being gone all the time. Yeah,

I'm not a betting man anyway, but if I was, I definitely wouldn't be betting on the success of these arranged marriages. But there's no way I could turn my mom down. Not on this. I know how much this town means to her, and there's no way I'm going to stand in the way of it being kept to its current standards. Snow Valley is a special place, and it means a lot to all of us. It's where our family is from, it's where we grew up, and it's where we plan to stay. We definitely need to preserve the town. For us and for all the townspeople.

So once the decision was made, I just had to go through with it. Honestly, I'm glad Mom had a plan for the arranged marriage. The only prospects I would have had in this town that would even consider marrying the likes of me is Jessica, one of my tattoo artists at the shop. She's nice enough, but marrying her would be a huge mistake. She's already following me around like a lost puppy; she probably would get the wrong idea and think it was a real marriage.

Nope, I don't need that drama. I need a professional. I mean, what kind of woman would be a mail order bride? She obviously knows what's up. I shake my head at the thought. My mom told me she talked to Mia, the woman I'm planning to marry, but I didn't get much more than that. Mom has romanticized all of this, thinking it's going to be six successful marriages. All I can do is promise her I'll do my best. I know it's not going to be some big love match, but we can at least attempt contentment and hopefully just a hint of happiness.

I finish signing and wait for Mr. Davis to give me a copy before giving him a thumbs-up on my way out of the office. I've already arranged for a licensed minister to officiate the marriage, paid for witnesses to be there, and by greasing a few palms even got the marriage license rushed through to be ready on time.

It's all working out. I now only have to pick up my bride-to-be, one Mia Devin, at the airport, and we'll get married right there. It will be nice and legal once we consummate the marriage. I don't want this lady getting the marriage annulled as a sham. Not sure what the lawyer would say, but I want it to be legally binding.

I can't stop the shake of my hand just thinking about it. Intimacy and I are strangers. Once I got back from the service, having received my purple heart and bronze star, I was too occupied with rehab and trying to heal. My hand instantly goes to my face and the puckered skin on the side of my cheek. Luckily the wound has healed, but it's still ugly. There's no other way to say it. I can't help but wonder if my mother informed the matchmakers or Mia about my face.

I just shake my head, trying to shove my insecurities away. This is happening, and I'm going to make the best of it.

It's a means to an end, just business.

Chapter 2

Mia

The man that was sitting across from me at the airport is now sitting beside me on the plane, and I've learned his name is Serge. He's a handsome guy and very charming. At least he's trying to be. We talk most of the way to Snow Valley. Him about the Fortune 500 company he works for, and because I know he doesn't want to hear about my life as a cashier, I tell him about my family's winery.

As we get closer to Snow Valley, I start to look out the window.

"I'm only here for a few days, and I should be able to tie up business."

I know he's about to ask me out, so I interrupt him. "I'm moving to Snow Valley. It is now going to be my home."

"I may have a little work to do while I'm here, but why don't you let me take you out to dinner?" he asks me.

If I had met Serge last week, I would have told him yes. But not today. I'm not even the least bit tempted. I'm very flattered all the same, and I smile at him with a twinkle in my eye. "I can't. I'm engaged."

He looks at my bare finger. "Why are you not wearing an engagement ring?"

I start to rub the knuckle of my ring finger. I'm still excited about this whole thing, but I'm also a little bit nervous. "Well, it's uh, been an online type relationship. I'm actually going to meet him for the first time in person at the airport."

Serge is baffled. There's no other way to explain it. He sputters and stammers. "But, what, wait!" He warns me, "This guy could be anybody. A crazy serial killer or something."

I wave my hand in front of me, laughing. Maybe I should be worried, but I'm not. I talked to the man's mother, for goodness sake, and she was—well, she was perfect. I can't explain it, but I know I trust her. "He can't be," I tell him.

"Why not?" he asks incredulously.

I just shrug my shoulders. "The matchmaker and his mother assured me that he is a good guy." I clasp my hands in my lap, feeling like that is answer enough, but for Serge it isn't.

He still looks astounded. "Mia, is this an arranged marriage?"

"Yes," I tell him as the pilot starts to make the announcements that we are about to land. Butterflies start to swarm in my tummy. Not because I'm second-guessing myself. No, I'm getting nervous because I hope Mason likes me. When this first all come about, I didn't even worry about it. But now, I can't help but wonder *What if I'm not his type? What if he likes skinny women that are quiet and reserved?* I look down at the expanse of my hips and know I'm none of those things. I'm curvy and have been known to speak my mind.

I start to fluff my hair, and I reapply the lipstick to my now faded lips. We sit in silence for a while, but I can feel Serge judging me. As soon as we land, I gather my purse and carry-on, walking off the plane.

I can tell that Serge is still taking it all in and doesn't understand what is happening, but I really don't feel like I need to share it with him, although he is a nice guy, and I do appreciate his concern. As we are walking to the baggage claim, he still seems shocked. "Are you sure about this, Mia? If you need help, I can help you."

The concern on his face is genuine. Does he think I'm being forced into this? "I want to do this. I do. Thank you for

your concern, but really, I'm going to be fine."

He walks beside me all the way to the baggage area and even helps me corral one of my suitcases. Before walking off, he gives me a sweet hug. "Good luck, well, with everything." He hands me his business card. "Just in case the matchmaker is wrong, and you need help after all."

I start to hand it back, but he cups my hand, folding my fingers around the card.

"Thank you," I tell him again and put the card in my purse. As soon as he turns away, I turn back to the belt, waiting on the next and final piece of luggage.

Mason

I got here early. I didn't want to worry about traffic and parking. So for the past hour I've been sitting at the baggage claim area, watching all the arrivals. I have a bouquet of red and white roses, since this is how Mia will recognize me per the matchmaker's instructions. Personally, I'm glad I didn't have to stand here with a sign and her name on it. For some reason, that seems awkward to me.

Mia is supposed to be a woman with long black hair wearing an off-the-shoulder white lacy dress and matching luggage with an image of the Eiffel tower on them.

I spot a gorgeous curvy woman with black hair and a white off-the-shoulder dress, but she's walking with some guy. I look away and start to scan the room again, but my gaze is drawn back to the woman. It can't be her. I try to keep looking, sure I'm going to spot her amongst the other arrivals, but as the last person in the crowd enters the area, I'm drawn back to the woman standing with the guy next to the luggage claim belt track.

She bends down to retrieve her luggage, and the man helps her, pulling it off the belt and setting it next to her. It's white

luggage with a big image of the Eiffel tower on the side of it. It has to be her.

I approach her and am annoyed when the guy hugs Mia. I hear the pretty boy in the suit and loafers wish her luck and then give her his number. I touch the scar that runs from just under my right eye straight down for three inches before it splits like branches of a river on a fucking map.

I pick up the second piece of luggage off the belt.

“Excuse me, that’s my...” Her voice trails off as she looks at me. I offer her the flowers and then brace myself for the rejection.

Is she going to deny that she’s Mia? Call the whole thing off?

She takes the flowers, and her smile is beautiful, but she’s a beautiful woman. Her pity smile couldn’t be ugly, not on her face.

Her eyes go to my cheek briefly and then immediately back to my eyes. I can’t read her thoughts; she is keeping them very guarded behind her light blue eyes and big smile. “Nice to meet you, Mason,” she says, and her voice is smooth as honey. Soft and low and filled with melody.

Speechless, I stare at her. Is this really the woman that signed up for an arranged marriage? She’s beautiful and appears to be sweet. Are the men blind where she comes from? Why would she need an arranged marriage? I would imagine men would be falling all over themselves to get to her.

I know I should offer my hand to her, but I stop myself, feeling for sure that she doesn’t want to be mauled by me at first sight. She’s still smiling, and I appreciate the fact she’s still being polite when it’s clear my scar has startled her. I nod toward the belt. “Do you have any more luggage?”

Chapter 3

Mia

I can't stop staring at Mason. He's a tall, powerful looking man. Joy, his mom, said he was just over six feet, with a slight scar on his face, but she'd minimized both characteristics. Mason has to be at least six foot five, and while his scar isn't slight, it makes him look quite formidable. He's handsome, and just looking at him almost takes my breath away.

Why hadn't Joy mentioned how piercing his green eyes are? And wow, his hands are ginormous!

"Everything has been arranged. We'll say the vows in a room just over there. I have a prenuptial agreement stating that we take from the marriage only what we brought into it in the event of a divorce. The marriage has to be consummated and last long enough for the land purchase to go through."

I stopped listening after he mentioned the prenuptial agreement, but by the time I decided it was a reasonable request since we don't know each other yet, he was finished saying the rest of whatever he was saying.

He's gruff and says it all matter-of-factly. He's pointing to a room off to the side instead of looking at me. He's nervous... or he doesn't want to do this. Are they forcing him to marry me? As soon as the thought pops into my head, I can't get it out. I can't marry someone that is being forced to do it. Does he not want to marry me?

I follow him, wheeling my first suitcase along behind me. I'm surprised the wedding is happening so soon, but Joy did

mention that Mason was in a time crunch for some reason. The room I follow him into has two people inside. It surprises me so much I nearly trip over my own feet.

“What’s wrong?” Mason asks me, gripping on to my waist to steady me.

“Isn’t your family coming?” I ask. I know he has five brothers, and I have to be honest, seeing Joy right now may help me a little bit. I need to see a friendly face. I had hoped my soon-to-be husband would offer me some kind of kindness or friendliness, but he looks as if he doesn’t even want to look at me.

“My brothers are tying knots of their own, so they couldn’t be here,” he tells me by way of explanation of why none of his family is here. He hands me the contract with a pen and then leaves to go speak to the other two men in the room.

I skim the contract and sign it as I hear Mason asking where the second witness is. I can see that he’s stressed out. I want to help, but I don’t know a single soul in Montana. Then I remember Serge.

“I can call my friend Serge. I met him on the airplane, and he might still be close,” I offer to the three men standing across the room. Anxious now, I set the flowers on the nearest table and wrap my arms around myself.

The two strangers seemed to be taking in my offer, but Mason seems angry at my words. He starts to say something but bites off his words when the second and final witness walks through the door. “Sorry I’m late.”

Mason doesn’t reply, just looks at his watch and then at me almost angrily. I begin to think that maybe he has a bad temper. I’m beginning to have second thoughts, but before I can voice them, the minister wants to begin the marriage ceremony.

I start to walk toward Mason but stop mid-stride. “Mason, can we talk for just a minute?” The way everything is being rushed, I know I have to at least have a conversation with him before I do this. I knew it was going to be rushed. I knew I was

going to be married today. But I had expected at least a conversation first and not one where he's looking at me crossly.

He leaves the other three men to talk and comes toward me, looking at me expectantly. The anger is still there, but at closer look I can't help but wonder if I'm mistaking the anger for something else.

"What do you want to talk about?" he asks grudgingly.

I can't help it. I laugh loudly. The other men look over at us, surprised before they go back to talking and ignoring us. "Oh, I don't know. I thought we could at least talk a little before we did this," I tell him, pointing toward the front of the room where we are to be married.

He shifts his weight to the other foot. "Okay." He seems unsure. "You start."

Never one to just hold things back, I ask him straightforward, "Do you want to marry me?"

My stomach seems to plummet when instead of answering me, he asks me the same question. "Do you want to marry me?"

I answer him honestly, "Well, I thought I did."

I start, but I don't get to finish. "Until what? You met pretty boy on the airplane or until you got a good look at me?" he says, pointing to the side of his face.

Then it dawns on me. He's jealous. The man I'm to marry, the man I just met, is jealous. And how can he even think I would want Serge? My God, Mason is more man than I've ever known.

I decide right then that I'm going to do it. I'm going to marry Mason Mistletoe.

I don't answer him, not ready to tell him everything and too shy to tell him just how handsome I think he is. I march to the front of the room, and when I turn back toward him, he's just standing there, staring at me. "We going to do this,

Mason? Because I'd like to be married to you," I tell him almost shyly.

He walks toward me slowly, obviously confused. He stands facing me, and I wish we had more time. I wish we could at least get to know each other a little bit before we do the ceremony. But in my heart, I know this is what I want to do.

Mason takes my hands in his, and I gasp softly. The sensation of heat and desire that originated at his touch and then radiates throughout my body is like nothing I've ever felt before. As his eyes snap to mine, I know he feels it too. He tightens his grip, and I can see the vein throbbing in his forehead.

We say our vows, repeating word for word what the minister tells us to say. And when Mason puts the rings on my finger and gives me the ring I am to use for him, my hands are shaking. I'm suddenly nervous at what it's going to be like to kiss him if just touching his hand has me tingling from head to toe.

Chapter 4

Mason

I disregard the surge of attraction that pulses throughout my body. It's just a built-in, natural response to an attractive female, nothing more. And it's not like I can do anything about it now. I'm pretty sure I've already freaked out Mia, and I don't know why she's going through with this anyway. I know I've scared her and am causing her to have second thoughts. Man, before the war, before the scar, I was the life of the party and could make anyone feel comfortable. But not anymore. I don't want any attention on myself, but I'm finding that I want hers. I want her to look at me and never look away. I clench my jaw and remind myself again that this is just a business deal. That's all. We are getting married to save Snow Valley. Nothing more, nothing less.

So why do I feel such a strong sense of possessiveness toward her when I slip the engagement and marriage rings on her finger? Why am I seeking her eyes out, wanting to look into their depths when earlier I didn't want her to look at me at all? And why do I feel the vows I repeat to her to the very depths of my soul? Even though I tried to convince myself that we can get a divorce if this doesn't work out, I know that there's no way I would go through with it. The promises I'm making to her right now I plan to keep. At least I will as long as she lets me.

Her quivering hand as she only just manages to put my ring on reminds me that she doesn't want me. And maybe she doesn't feel the vows as strongly as I do. She's freaking out, and the way her breaths are labored I'm almost worried she's going to pass out. This is all just a business deal. That's all. A

business deal. It's almost like a chant that is on repeat in my head. Call it what you want, but I'm guarding my heart because this little petite woman with the curves and innocent face has me wanting things I shouldn't be wanting. Things I shouldn't even be thinking about. Like spending forever with her in my arms. Before I can get further into my thoughts, I drag my eyes from hers.

My military training has my senses kicking at me that someone is watching us, and I look over at the window of the door.

Pretty boy is on the other side, watching us. I should have known that he wouldn't just disappear, but I can't say that I blame him. I don't think I could walk away from her easily either. Obviously, he thought more of their meeting than she did.

My hands tighten on Mia, and she looks at me questioningly. Her shining blue eyes are clear as a cloudless summer sky. She's beautiful and breathtaking, and as of right now, she's mine. And I plan to claim her.

The possessive feeling returns, and I give in to it as the minister announces, "You may now kiss the bride."

I'd planned to give her a simple kiss, but as my lips touch hers, that plan goes out the window. I give her such a deep, searing kiss that anybody watching knows that Mia belongs to me. I kiss her longer than I should, considering the fact that we just met and also the fact that she is probably scared to death of my gruff demeanor. But I can't let her go. I wrap my arms around her, resting them on her back and tugging her close, fitting her against my hard body. The hard peaks of her nipples scrape across my chest. Her hands are at my waist, and they clench at the material of my shirt as if she's worried that I'll stop or pull away. The moan either comes from her or me or the both of us, but it doesn't stop me from sweeping my tongue in her mouth and tasting her before forcing myself to pull away before I embarrass her even further.

I stare down into her red face, and it's deeply satisfying to find her eyes still closed after I end the kiss. She reaches up

and touches her lips with her fingers as if she's savoring the kiss we just shared. I completely understand, because I'm licking mine, wanting just another taste of her. She's flushed, and when she opens her eyes to look at me, I can see the desire in their depths. She wants me. There's no doubt about it. At least I know that even if she isn't attracted to me physically, she is to our chemistry.

I don't even have to look to know that pretty boy is no longer standing in the window. *That's right, Serge. She's mine.*

Chapter 5

Mia

I ask him a lot of questions once we are in his truck on the highway heading to a cabin he rented for a few days. It isn't the honeymoon in Paris I'd imagined for myself in my youth, but sitting next to the only man who's ever stolen my breath and made my body burn hot from a single kiss makes me not even care about what kind of honeymoon I'm going to have. A cozy cabin with Mason where we can get to know each other and spend our first Christmas together... I'll take it.

Mason doesn't talk much. His answers are short, at least the ones he actually gives. He doesn't seem to want to share very much of himself. Maybe he's shy and just needs more time.

He doesn't ask me questions about myself but listens when I offer up my answers to a few of the questions I asked him. The drive seems long, and I hardly slept the last two nights I was so excited and nervous about coming and meeting and marrying a stranger. I could almost fall asleep in his truck if my nerves would let me.

The longer we go, the more insecure I feel. It's awkward now, and instead of a comfortable silence, I feel like there is a heavy weight all around us. "Mason?"

He seems to wait for me to continue, and when I don't, he asks, "Yeah?"

"I know this is weird and you can tell me no..." I start and then stall.

He doesn't respond, just looks in the rearview mirror and back at the road again. I put my hand on the console between us.

He still doesn't look at me, but the corners of his lips tilt up. "What is it? I won't tell you no. I mean, what kind of husband would I be if I told my wife no about something on her wedding day? What is it? You don't want to go to the cabin?"

"No! I mean, yes, I want to go to the cabin. I uh, well, I'm a little nervous and I thought maybe, if you don't mind, maybe you could hold my hand if that's all right," I ask him. My voice, once strong and demanding, fades off with insecurity. I mean, he's my husband. Surely to goodness I can ask him to hold my hand. I flex my hand, palm up on the console between us.

He looks taken aback for a minute, and I think he's about to tell me no. "You want me to hold your hand?"

"Forget it," I tell him and start to pull my hand away, embarrassed.

But Mason reaches out, taking my hand in his. He curls his fingers around mine and holds on to me tightly. Pure happiness surges through me, and I couldn't hide my smile if I tried. And of course, after looking straight ahead the whole way, Mason now chooses to look over at me, and I can't wipe the goofy grin off my face.

Instead of smiling back, he grunts and nods his head at me. "We're married, Mia. You don't have to ask me to hold your hand. You don't have to ask if you can touch me, or really, ask for anything. You want something from me, something I have or can give you, you take it. It's yours. I know this—the arranged marriage and well, me—isn't what you were expecting, but I'm going to do right by you. I promise. And if there's anything I can do to make you happy, well, I'm going to do it."

It's the most words he's ever said to me, and instead of grumbling and attitude, I got poetry. Stunned is the only way I know how to describe it. If I was standing up, I'd probably fall

over at his words. As his hand tightens on mine, I can't help but push him a little further. "So if I wanted to kiss you, just out of the blue, you'd let me? I can kiss you anytime I want? Because I have to tell you, you don't seem too happy I'm here, so I just want to be sure that I get it all right."

He seems taken aback. He opens his mouth and then closes it again. He brings our hands up and presses his lips to the back of my knuckles. "I'm your husband, Mia. And you're my wife. I know nothing about today was normal, but what I do know is that you can kiss me anytime you want. And you're wrong, Mia."

"Wrong about what?" I ask, feeling lost as I watch his lips touch my hand.

He drops our hands to his lap, pressing my palm to his thick, corded thigh. I can feel the muscles pull and flex under my palm, and he rests his hand on top of mine. "I do want you here. With me."

My whole body shivers, and I can feel my heart start to race. He wants me here. I could keep talking, asking him questions just so I can hear his voice, but I don't. I sit next to him in the cab of his truck, listening to the soft song on the radio as he drives us to our honeymoon cabin. I'm not expecting words of love or anything like that, but for the rough start we had, it's definitely improving. I look over at Mason and watch him as he drives before smoothing out my dress.

"Your dress is pretty," Mason says even though I don't think he even looked in my direction to see me smoothing it out. Maybe because he says so very little, his compliment means more to me because I can feel my cheeks burning with my blush.

"Thank you," I tell him before looking out the window and already trying to picture what our future holds.

Chapter 6

Mason

I pull in to the driveway of the cabin that is in the mountains of Snow Valley. I could have just taken her home, to my place at the edge of town, but I thought this would be better. We need time to get to know one another. My family has decided that instead of a big Christmas, we will see the family closer to the New Year to give everyone time to get settled. But I know my family, especially my mom. There's no way she could stay away, and I don't want to share Mia with anyone right now. I want to spend it with her and only her.

I help her out of the truck and carry our bags inside, setting them by the front door. "Would you like something to eat?" I ask her. "I had the fridge stocked up. I wasn't sure what you liked, but I made sure to get a variety of things."

She's gripping the edge of the counter, her knuckles white from the pressure, and I know she's nervous. "I, uh—" She puts her hand over her stomach and grimaces. "I don't think I can eat anything right now. Nerves!" she says with a laugh.

I hold my hand out to her, and she looks at it for what feels like minutes but is probably a mere few seconds. I almost pull back, rejected, but she finally reaches out, putting her hand in mine. "I'll show you around."

We walk around the cabin, and I show her the rest of the kitchen and living room. She admires the Christmas tree in the corner, and after seeing the pleasure on her face, I'm glad that the company had the cabin decorated for the holiday. I pull her toward the stairs, grabbing one of her bags on the way and then release her hand so I can follow her up the stairs for the

bedrooms. Her hips sway in front of me, and the sound of her dress swishing back and forth mesmerizes me. Her dress is fitted along her bottom and short enough I can see her curvy calves. With my mouth watering and telling myself I need to relax before I scare the daylights out of her, I take deep, muted breaths and ignore the expanding bulge in my pants.

I show her the bathroom in the hallway, a spare bedroom, and then the bedroom that I had already set my suitcase in earlier. "I'll bring your luggage up in a little while."

She looks around the room and walks toward the window, looking out at the backyard. "It's beautiful, Mason."

I walk up behind her, but instead of looking outside like I intended, I'm looking down at the top of her head. Her body is tense in front of me, and I reach out, my hand spanning her waist. She turns in my arms and looks up at me with hooded eyes. Because I can't not do it, I lean down and capture her lips with mine. She kisses me back, her hand cupping my jaw and stretching along my neck.

Our lips move against each other until instead of soft and exploring, something switches, and it becomes something more. The kiss turns frenzied and demanding, and my hands start to roam her body, across her shoulders and down her back to land on her sweet, full backside. I squeeze her, pulling her into me, and before I'm too far gone, I feel her tense in my arms, like an iron board, hard and unyielding.

She's repulsed by me.

I drop my hands instantly and step back from her. Her lips are wet, swollen, and red. Her eyes are glassy and looking back at me with desire. But even seeing all that, I know I need to walk away. I'm not going to push myself on her.

I leave without a word, tromping down the stairs and out the back door to go chop wood. I have to do something to get out my frustrations, and wielding an ax is going to do it. I remind myself for the hundredth time, *This marriage isn't real, it's just business.*

But even as I mutter it under my breath, I can't tamp down the thought that maybe we could make it real.

Mia

I stand in his bedroom—our bedroom—with my hands to my lips and watch him walk away. When he was kissing me, I was trying to pull away to tell him that I wanted to freshen up, but he was out the door before I could. My body is humming, alive with need, and I'm mentally kicking myself for not just going for it with him. It's what I wanted. And by the way he held me in his arms, I know it's what he wanted too.

I go to the window and watch as he walks out of the house and instantly grabs a piece of wood, holding an ax over his head and then bringing it down to split the wood in half.

I watch him in awe. Even from this angle, I can tell he is mad. At me or himself, I'm not sure, but I know that I could stand here and watch him all day.

Like a peeping Tom, I watch as he repeats the process over and over. When he tugs his shirt over his head and tosses it to the ground, I gasp loudly, the sound echoing in the room. His muscled chest is formed perfectly. Every muscle stretches in his arms and taut stomach as he swings the ax over and over. He's like a man on a mission, not willing to be deterred. I could stand here and watch him for hours if I didn't want to get caught. His arms, shoulders, and chest are covered in tattoos, and I wish I was closer to be able to see the designs.

My body is heated, and I start to fan my face. The sun is starting to set, and I wonder how much longer he will be out there. My body tingles, wanting him to be near again. I have to drag my eyes from him in the backyard. The next time, I'm going to be ready for him. I walk to the bathroom and start filling the large jet tub so I can shave my legs. Closing up my lease and packing in under a week left little time for me to do much else before I left for Montana.

Chapter 7

Mason

After taking my aggression out with the ax, I go back inside and carry Mia's remaining bags upstairs. Setting them in the corner, I hear her taking a bath. I stand outside the door for just a second, but it's enough for me to imagine the water trickling down her body, and I discover my time with the ax has been wasted. Already I can feel my body reacting to her even though I can't see her or touch her. I'd give anything to be able to walk into where she is and take her into my arms. It's like a magnetic force drawing me in. The urge is so strong I have to literally force myself to be strong and walk away.

Since I'm sweaty from chopping wood, I go to take a shower in the other bathroom in the hall. Instead of hot, I turn the knob to its coldest setting and stand under the spray, leaning back and letting the cold blast of water hit me right in the face. I don't know if I want it to be a wake-up call or for it to bring me back to my senses, but I know I need some kind of jolt. With my head held back and eyes closed, I try not to think of anything. Especially my wife that is on the other side of the wall, sitting naked in her bath, running a sponge up and down her curvy body. My eyes pop open at the image, and a groan escapes me. There's no use. Already, in one afternoon, I'm obsessed. It wasn't supposed to be like this. We got married to save Snow Valley. I had hoped for contentment or at the very least friendship. I wasn't expecting or even ready for this attraction that has taken hold of me as if it's squeezing the breath out of me. I am one hundred percent attracted to my wife. But remembering how she tensed in my arms earlier is a reminder that maybe she's not as attracted to me as I am to her.

After cleaning up, I wrap the towel around my waist. I figure she'll already be finished since she began bathing before me, but she's still in the tub. I pull on my flannel pajama bottoms I brought. To make her more comfortable, I build a fire in the fireplace and turn off the lights so she won't have to look at the scar on my face. Then I sit at the desk, turn the lamp on low, and listen to her singing to herself. I pick up my paper pad and pencil, thinking I'll draw and design a new tattoo for the shop. I'm trying to stay business-minded, after all.

I don't know how much time goes by, but as soon as Mia stops singing, it seems I come out of a trance. I got lost in the drawing as I drew Mia's face and hair without thinking about it. Disgusted with myself, I stare at the very similar replica of her and realize that I've already memorized every detail of her face. I turn off the lamp, tossing the pen and paper on the desk, and lean back in the chair in the dark corner. I'm in way too deep already.

Mia

I open the bathroom door with the towel wrapped around my body. How jet-lagged am I that I forgot to bring something to change into? I'm lucky there were shampoo and soap samples for me to use. The cabin is dark except for the fire burning in the fireplace. I stand perfectly still, listening to the sounds of the house, wondering if Mason is inside or not. Besides the normal house sounds, I can't hear him. I look out the window, and the spot where he was chopping wood before now only has an ax buried into the stump. I stare at it, and for just a second I wonder if maybe he left. I can't see where he parked his truck from here, but I know that even if he did leave, he'll be back. I'm not sure exactly how I know it, but I do.

I walk over to my suitcase and let the towel that's wrapped around my body fall to the floor. I'm searching, moving things around until I feel the cool, silky material of my nightgown. I

pull it out of the bag and hold it in front of me, looking for any wrinkles when I hear a grunt or a whisper behind me. “Mia.”

Chapter 8

Mason

I'm frozen, gripping the desk in the dark. I'm captivated by the sexy-as-fuck strip show Mia has no idea she's giving me. She's so fucking beautiful. I watch her towel fall to the floor and then her searching through her bag. I get so hard it's almost painful to watch her hold up the nightgown, knowing she's about to cover her body from me.

I stand up and cross over to her, muttering her name on the way.

She turns just as I get to her, and I know she's surprised that I'm standing here. I stand over her, breathing her in, feeling every move she makes because we are so close. "We're supposed to consummate the marriage, Mia." My voice is rough and gravelly, filled with emotion. "I turned down the lights... I know my scar..."

She leans her head back to look up at me. "I don't care about your scar," she says vehemently and then softens. "I mean, I care how you got it, but I don't care like you think I do. I, well, uh, I still want you."

I cup her face to keep her looking at me. "Earlier—"

"Earlier I needed to shower. That's the only reason I tensed up. I want this, I want it with you. And not because we have to or whatever. Because I want you." She blows a breath out, frustrated by the way my thoughts are going.

I barely let her get the words out before I have her up in my arms, and I lay her back on the bed. She's still gripping her

nightgown in front of her, and I take it, pulling it away from her and tossing it to the end of the bed.

Standing over her, I look at every exposed part of her, taking it all in, committing it to memory. She's breathtaking.

I lean forward and rub my knuckles along her cheek before I stroke them down her neck, across her shoulder, and down to the very peak of her breast. She trembles underneath my touch. I palm her breast, caressing her as her back arches off the bed, pushing herself deeper into my hand.

"Mason..." she moans.

"Yes?" I answer, caressing both her breasts.

"Will you kiss me... there?" she asks me huskily.

I smile, not believing that this perfect woman is my wife. My answer to her is to lean forward and replace my hand with my mouth. I suckle her as I let my hand slide between her thighs, cupping her sex. With one swipe through her sex, I find her wet and ready for me.

As I kiss down her body, she mewls and makes the sexiest noises, but as soon as my lips graze her mound, she's silent, and her body tenses up. I kiss along her opening, smoothing my tongue along her, savoring her taste.

Her hand goes to the back of my head and threads through my hair. I press my tongue to her bundle of nerves, and her body bucks against me. "Yes..." she moans.

I don't relent. I apply pressure with my tongue and beg for her release. Soft, fast, slow, hard, I change it up until I learn how her body reacts, and I know what she likes and what she wants. When I've barely gotten my fill of her, she's already mindless, pushed over the edge, coming on my tongue. I lap at her, kissing her most private area, loving her until she's limp and delirious.

He gave me the best orgasm I've ever had. He kisses up my body, and when he's next to me, I kiss him softly before scooting down the bed to return the favor.

"No, honey."

His harsh words are grunted at me, and I look at him with some sort of shock. "I want to..."

"I won't even last. I need to be inside you. Now! All I've thought about since I saw you in that other man's arms is being inside you, taking you and making you mine, making you forget every man that's ever held you before," he pleads with me, pushing me to my back and rolling on top of me.

"Man, what man?" I ask him, not having a clue who he's talking about.

"The man from the plane."

"Se—" But I don't get his name out.

He stops me with a groan as his head falls to my chest. "I don't even want to hear you say his name."

I smile then, not believing the control that I have over this brute of a man, my husband. "Me too, Mason. I felt the same way when I saw you. I wanted you to be mine." I run my hands down his chest, between his legs, taking his girth in my hands. "I wanted you like this."

He hisses, and his hips buck into my hand as I stroke him.

There's fire in his eyes as he lowers to his knees and sits up, lining his hardness to my opening. For one brief second, I'm nervous. "Please be easy, Mason," I ask him.

His eyes look at me as if he's asking me a question, but before he even voices it, I tell him, "You're my first. I was saving myself for my husband."

Again, his head falls to my chest with a muttered "Fuck."

There's an inner debate he has with himself. He looks at me worriedly. "I don't want to hurt you."

I take a deep breath and put my trust in him. "I know you won't."

He locks eyes with me and pushes into me gently at first, and he's stretching me, filling me up. I feel full and stretched as my body accepts him. I know the instant he reaches my barrier. His fingers go to my clit again, and I'm still sensitive from my earlier orgasm, so it isn't long before I'm ready again, and he pushes through, completely filling me up and taking me.

With each thrust, he whispers against me, "Mine. Mine. Mine."

I want to reassure him and let him know that I am in fact his, but I'm half out of my mind with the way my body is responding to his. He moans against my neck, kissing me, and my senses are on overload. I can feel him everywhere, and before long, I'm coming again. My heart is racing, there's sweat on my brow, and I'm panting.

He thrusts once, twice more, and then he's grunting, filling me with his cum.

"Yes," I moan.

Completely satiated, I lie listless and limp as he falls down beside me. I don't know what you're supposed to do afterward, so I follow my gut and curl into him, kissing his chest.

With his arms circling me, he holds me so tight I can barely breathe, but I don't ask him to stop. I've never felt so safe, so cared for, or dare I say...so loved.

Chapter 9

Mason

I feel like I'm losing my mind.

I keep telling myself it's not real, but I've never felt anything so real as what I feel when I'm with Mia. We've been at the cabin for forty-eight hours already, and I haven't been able to keep my hands off her.

The only thing that keeps me remembering that this isn't real is thinking about that hug Mia shared at the airport with that Serge guy. Maybe she just wants to be with someone, and it doesn't matter who it is. Maybe she's lonely or maybe she believes in fairy tales and things like that. I don't know the reason, and a part of me is worried about finding out.

Today is Christmas, and I'm lying on the couch recovering from the big breakfast that we had. Mia loved the presents I got her, a soft blanket, a robe with *Mrs. Mistletoe* printed on the back, and the diamond earrings. Of all her presents, I think she loved the robe the most. Instead of putting it on, I've caught her staring at her name since she received it.

She gave me a beard kit, pajama bottoms, and homemade coupons offering back rubs, showers together, and alone time. She took back the shaving kit and the pajamas as soon as I opened them because she decided she likes my beard and doesn't want me sleeping in pants. Luckily, she let me keep the coupons, and I know I'll be redeeming those very soon.

"Mason, did you do this?" she asks me, walking into the living room.

She's holding up the picture I drew of her, but I'm not looking at it. I'm looking at her. She's in awe of the portrait, and the way she's looking at me cuts through my walls of defense like a tongue through whipped cream. I sit up, pulling her into my arms until she lands on my lap, and I cradle her there. "Yes. That first night when you were in the bath."

She shakes her head, confused. "How? I mean, we'd just met, how did you do such a portrait without even looking at me?"

I should be embarrassed. I should just blow it off, but I can't. "From the first moment I saw you, before I was even sure you were the one I was going to marry, I had committed everything about you to memory. You're beautiful, Mia."

"Oh, Mason." She puts her hand on my chest as her face flushes a pretty pink.

I cup her jaw. "Tell me something about you. Something I don't know."

She looks up at the ceiling and back at me. "Uh, I own a winery."

"What?" I ask her, surprised. "You own a winery?"

"Well, yes. When my parents passed, it was left to me, but I haven't been there since their death. I haven't been able to bring myself to go there." A sadness overcomes her face, and I rub my thumb across her cheek as if I could smooth out her worry lines. "I have people in place to run it, but maybe one day you would want to go there with me?" she asks me hopefully.

"Sure, absolutely." I think about the fact that she has an income, she's beautiful and smart, she's everything. Why did she agree to this marriage? I can't figure it out. "Why did you agree to an arranged marriage, Mia?" I ask her, thinking her answer will be what keeps me from tipping over the edge.

She starts to talk about her parents. And instead of the sadness when she brought them up before, her face is filled with hope. Her hand goes to my face, tracing the scar on my cheek, and then she leans in and kisses the puckered skin there

softly before pulling back. “My parents had an arranged marriage. Neither one of them wanted to go through with it, but as soon as they saw each other, they agreed to it.” She shrugs her shoulders. “It was love at first sight. It was fate. I know that’s what it was. And I don’t know, but when I talked to your mom, I couldn’t not do it. It weighed on me so heavily, I knew I was going to do it.” She takes a deep breath and pulls back her shoulders, looking me straight in the eye as if daring me to disagree with her. “I believe it’s fate that brought us together.”

I brush the hair off her face and don’t even try to look away from her. It hits me hard how fucking fearless this little half pint of a woman is. She believes in fairy tales, happy endings, and true love. Looking at her, I know she deserves to receive nothing less.

We stare at each other so long I can see every emotion filter across her face. I wrap my hand around the base of her neck. “I’m all in, my fearless Mia.”

I seal my lips to hers, wanting her to know exactly what I’m feeling. I’m never going to get enough of her, but there’s an edge that I feel. With my life, the things I’ve seen, I can’t help but wonder if this is too good to be true. Can it really last? I know how I feel, but what about her? She’s young and has so much to offer. How can she settle with a broken hero that doesn’t believe in fairy tales anymore?

Mia

It’s a few days after Christmas, and we’re finally home. I’m glad that Mason and I had the last few days to get to know one another, but it’s nice being able to get things set up in our home. He has a beautiful little cabin and told me I could decorate it however I want. He’s next door at his tattoo shop, and I’m moving about the house, putting all my things away. He’s gone above and beyond to make me feel welcome, and I know it’s crazy, but I miss him. He’s only next door, and he

told me I could come over there and hang out at any time, but I don't want him to think I'm clingy or anything.

But by the evening, I'm going crazy. I've never been this way before, and it's hard to navigate what's the right way and wrong way to handle things. It's after dinner, so it wouldn't be completely absurd for me to take him a sandwich. Wouldn't most wives do that for their husbands? I know my mom did for my dad all the time.

I make him a sandwich and put chips and fruit with it. I grab the bag and take a deep breath before stepping out onto the porch. The tattoo shop has two cars in the parking lot, so chances are he's busy. I'll just deliver the food, get to see him even if it's only for a few minutes, and then come back home.

I walk through the front door of the tattoo shop, and the bell jingles announcing my arrival. A woman raises her head and looks at me. She doesn't smile or seem remotely friendly as she looks me up and down. "So you're her, huh?"

There's blatant hostility in her voice, but I do my best to ignore it. "I'm sorry. We haven't met, have we? I'm Mia... Mason's wife."

She curses. It's muttered under her breath, but I can hear it all the same. "I'm Jessica, but you probably already know that. I'm sure Mason told you all about me." She shakes her head. "So he went through with it, did he?"

I put one hand to my chest. Mason has never mentioned the name Jessica, but I don't want to make her feel bad for it. But the way she's talking, I'm wondering why Mason hadn't mentioned her. I'm not used to dealing with people that obviously don't like me, and I don't know how to take her. Plus, she works with Mason. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean."

She shrugs. "I mean, it's crazy that he was forced to marry you... all so him and his brothers could save Snow Valley. Are we back in the old days or what? I mean, it's crazy, right? But at least he said there's an out. You two won't be stuck together forever."

I start to panic. Is that what he's telling people? That once he figures out a way to save Snow Valley, he's going to divorce me? My breath comes quickly and shallow. My hand that's not holding the bag clenches in a fist at my side. I feel flushed, nauseous, and on edge. When Jessica realizes that her words have bothered me, her smile gets even bigger. With a trembling hand, I hold up the bag of food. "I brought Mason dinner."

She walks across the room. She's slender with short hair and she has a hip look about her in her holey jeans and tight T-shirt. She looks to be my exact opposite. She grabs the bag from my hand. "Thanks. I'll make sure he gets it. He's in the middle of a tattoo, and he hates being disturbed."

I nod and turn to leave. I don't tell her bye or nice to meet her because I don't want to lie to her.

I hightail it back over to the safety of our house. As soon as I walk in the door, I fall back against it and let the tears fall. I had so many hopes for this marriage before I even met Mason. After meeting him, it was like all my dreams were coming true. How could I have been so wrong?

Chapter 10

Mason

I only worked around five hours. I went in later in the afternoon and worked into the evening, but I swear it felt like the longest shift of my life. All I could think about was Mia. I wondered what she was doing and if she was okay. I almost called her a few times to see if she wanted to come and sit for awhile, but I figured she probably needed a little space. We'd been with each other for more than a few days.

I walk through the front door of the house, and the lights are already out. I walk up the stairs and into the bedroom, letting out a breath when I see her lying on the bed. I had panicked for just a minute, wondering if she'd left or something.

I sit down on the chair facing the bed and start pulling my shoes off. I can't take my eyes off her, and I watch her body move with each breath she takes. I know she's awake, but she's acting like she's not.

"Mia," I say softly into the dark room that is only lit by the moonlight peeking in through the window.

She doesn't open her eyes. "Yes?"

"Are you awake?" I ask her dumbly.

"Yes. I'm awake," she says. Her voice is thick, and something sounds off.

"Why didn't you wait for me when you brought food? I would have liked to show you around."

She doesn't answer me, but she does sniff. I move the angle from where I'm sitting, and I take in her puffy lips and the wet spot on the pillow she's lying on. I crouch down on the floor next to her. "Mia, honey, look at me."

She opens her eyes but doesn't say a word. She's been crying. There's so much pain in her face, I can feel my heart cracking. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She sits up and moves backwards on the bed. She's putting distance between us, and I don't like it. I rise from the floor and sit on the bed, my hip next to her legs. She's watching me but not saying anything. That's not Mia. Not the Mia I know, anyway. I put my hand on her leg and ignore the way it tenses under my palm. "What's going on?"

She clenches her eyes shut. She starts talking, soft and low. "I think we made a mistake, Mason. I think this happened too fast."

There's a sudden heaviness on my chest. A part of me knew this was too good to be true. After only a few days, she's ready to divorce me. My head starts to pound, and my heart starts to ache. "What do you mean we made a mistake?"

She finally opens her eyes. Her voice is saying one thing, but her eyes are telling me something else. She looks like she's going to be physically ill. "I thought about it, and maybe it would be better if I go back home."

"This is your home." I enunciate each word. It's the truth. This is her home now. Without her in it, it's nothing but a house.

She shakes her head. "It's fine. I'll be okay. And we can stay married... I know how important Snow Valley is to you."

She's moved her knee from under my hand, and I clench the covers. "Stay married..." I mumble, shock hitting me right in the face. She's leaving me. How in the world did I screw this up already?

She scoots across the bed to the other side and gets up. She's in her nightgown, and it's long, white, and flowy. It shouldn't be sexual, the cotton material, the way it covers all

her body parts, but still, it's probably one of the sexiest nightgowns I've ever seen. All because it's on Mia.

She turns away from me, her hands on the dresser. "Well, I mean we can stay married if you want to... If you found a way to save Snow Valley without it... then you can divorce me."

She chokes up on the word *divorce*, and that's the only saving grace I have to hold on to. She doesn't act like she wants to leave me. She acts like this is hurting her... so why is she even doing it?

I stand up and walk around the bed. Her body freezes under my touch, but I put my arms around her, locking my hands around her middle and pulling her against me. She keeps her back straight, and I wait for her to pull away, but I already know I'm not going to let her. If she wants to end this marriage, I'm going to hold her while she tries to convince me she's better off without me.

"What made you change your mind? What did I do?" I ask softly against her ear.

I raise my eyes and look at the mirror on the dresser in front of us. She's staring at our reflection. "You didn't do anything."

She's lying. I can see it in her face. "Bullshit, honey. Tell me what I did. I can't fix it if you don't tell me."

Her body starts to melt into mine, and she leans her head back against my chest. She has her eyes closed again. "When I married you, I thought it would be forever. At least I wanted it to be."

My arms tighten around her. Can't she see I want the same thing? "Me too. That's what I want too."

Her eyes clench. "No, Mason. Please don't lie to me. I can handle anything—well, almost anything—but don't lie to me. I can't handle that."

"Look at me," I tell her.

She shakes her head, and I turn her in my arms. She still has her eyes closed as if looking at me is going to be painful or

something. “Look at me,” I tell her again.

She opens her eyes, and when she does, a lone tear falls down her cheek. “Fuck,” I mutter. I wipe it away with the pad of my finger and then pick her up in my arms. I carry her back across the room and sit in the chair with her in my lap. “Tell me what’s going on.”

She leans against my chest. “I’m leaving, Mason. It will be easier now than later. It’s killing me, but if I wait, I won’t survive it.”

Her hand curls into my shirt, her palm over my heart. “But I don’t understand. Why are you leaving at all?”

I want to understand, I need to know what’s going through her mind, but at the same time, I know I’ll never let her go.

“Jessica told me what you said.”

“What did I say?” I ask her, wracking my brain, trying to remember anything that I’ve said to Jessica that would upset Mia. I can’t think of anything. I don’t really talk to Jessica a lot.

“You said—” She stops and takes a deep breath. “You said that there was an out... that we wouldn’t be stuck together forever, and I’ve thought about it all afternoon, Mason. It will probably be better if I leave now rather than later.”

I put my finger at her chin and bring her face up to mine. “You’re not leaving me, Mia. I won’t let you.”

She wraps her hand around mine. “But it’s for the best in the long run.”

I wrap my hand around her chin. I hate to hear her talk this way. “No, it’s not. I told that to Jessica when I first heard about my mother’s idea of the arranged marriage. That was before my mother talked to you and before I even met you.”

She blinks and opens her mouth to say something, but I put my finger over her lips to stop her. “And now, well now that I have you, that you’re my wife, you’re Mrs. Mason Mistletoe, there’s no way I’d ever let you go. Before I met you, I never believed in forever. I didn’t think I would ever find love like

my parents have. But now, fuck, now, Mia, I can't imagine my life without you in it."

Her eyes widen. "So you don't plan to divorce me once everything is handled with Snow Valley?"

I shake my head sternly. "Nothing matters to me but you, Mia. You're my life now. Any and everything I do is for you."

She's watching me closely, searching my face, and I know she needs to hear the words almost as much as I need to say them. "No, Mia. I'm not divorcing you. I know we haven't known each other long, but I love you. I know you could do better than me. I know you're young, beautiful, smart and have your own money. You don't need me. But I promise you that there is no one that will ever love you more than I do."

She shakes her head. "But you're wrong, Mason."

I look at her questioningly. She holds on to the front of my shirt and pulls me closer so our lips are almost touching. "I do need you. I felt like I couldn't breathe just thinking about leaving you. I need you, Mason."

I smile, ready to seal it with a kiss, but she continues. "And more than that, I love you. I knew when I first saw you and the possessive way you looked at me that I loved you. More than anything in this world, I want to be yours."

I kiss her then. Fiercely, without holding back. She turns in my lap, straddling me. I pull back just enough to pull her nightgown off. "That's good, honey. Because you're mine. You'll always be mine."

She raises her arms, and I pull the gown over her head. She leans in, pressing her breast against my chest. "I like the sound of that."

I spend the whole night—the rest of eternity—showing her that I mean it. She's mine... and I'm hers.

Later in the night, I'm nestled in Mason's arms, and I feel so close to him.

I could stay right here, just like this—just the two of us—and know I'll never want another thing.

Cuddled against him, tracing patterns on his chest, I ask him, "Do you think your family is going to like me?"

"Oh, I don't know..." he starts.

I gasp and look up into his face, and he's smiling wickedly at me. "Oh, you," I say, playfully slapping him on the chest.

Finally he says, "They'll love you. Not as much as I do, but yeah."

I wrap my arms around his neck, planting a big kiss on his lips. "I love you, too. Now feed me, Mr. Mistletoe, and then take me back to bed."

He stands up and holds his hand out. "As you wish, wife." We go down to the kitchen where we eat, but we don't make it back to the bedroom before he shows me again just how much he needs me.

Epilogue

Mia

One Year Later

“I can’t believe it’s been this long since I’ve been here. Do you think my parents would be upset with me?” I ask Mason.

He’s holding my hand outside of my parents’ winery and tugs me to a stop. My heart rate speeds up just looking at him. We’ve been married a year, and it was the best thing I’ve ever done in my life. Mason has proven over and over that it was definitely fate that brought us together. There is no doubt in my mind that we are soul mates and were made for each other. I know it, and I’m pretty sure he believes it too.

He’s just staring at me with so much love on his face that I know my plans for today are going to be perfect.

He brings my hand up and kisses my knuckles. “Your mom and dad would understand you needed time. We’re here now. And I can’t wait for you to show me everything.”

I look out on the vineyard, and even though the vines are bare right now, I can remember how beautiful this place is in the summer. Luckily, my plan has been in play for a while now, and I was able to have it completed with the sweetest grapes of the season.

Ava, the manager that has been overseeing the winery, walks up to me, and after a few pleasantries, she places a box in my hands. “Here it is. The new wine you approved,” she tells me with her eyebrows wagging.

I snap my eyes to Mason, but luckily, he didn't notice. Fortunately, my husband only has eyes for me. I turn back to Ava and tell her, "Thank you," but she's already almost to the door she just came in. With a quick wave, she walks out, leaving us alone together.

"This is for you," I tell him, handing him the box.

Surprised, his eyes flick to mine. "For me?"

Nodding, I gesture for him to open it. I had a big speech, but I knew I wouldn't be able to do it without tears pouring from my eyes, I've been so emotional lately, so I had them attach a letter to the box.

He opens the envelope and reads the letter.

Dear Mason,

I love you, I think you know that. I am so thankful that fate (and your mom) brought us together. You and your family have helped me heal and have made me feel a part of your family. You make me happy every day. I've enjoyed the last year together, and I know we will have many years to come. Because you gave me something special, I knew I wanted to give you something that you would cherish too. I hope you like your present.

I love you! Mia

As soon as he's done reading, his eyes take me in, and even though I didn't read it, I can recite it word for word. I'm filled with emotion as a tear rolls down my cheek. He takes his thumb and brushes it away before latching his lips to mine. He deepens the kiss, but I force myself to pull away. "Open the gift."

He opens the box and takes out the bottle of wine. I stand next to him and look at it with the logo and the words *Fate of the Mistletoe* written in big bold letters. It's the exact design that Mason had drawn and given me. "This is why you wanted me to draw the mistletoe?"

I nod, loving the design he made. I had told him it was a logo for a tattoo I was thinking about getting. He had no idea that I was having a wine made especially for him.

“This is amazing, honey,” he tells me, pulling me in for another kiss, but I stop him with a hand to his chest.

“There’s more.”

“More?” he asks. I take the bottle from his hands so he can search in the box.

He pulls out another envelope and opens it. There’s a black and white photo. It’s almost impossible to guess what you’re looking at until you see the small typed font, “Baby Mistletoe.”

“A baby?”

“Yes!” I whisper to him.

“You’re pregnant?” he asks.

I laugh then, realizing that I really did take him by surprise. “Yes. I’m pregnant. I’m about eight weeks along, so around summertime you’ll have a son... or a daughter.”

He just stares at me with shock on his face. I put my hands at his waist. “Mason, are you okay?”

Finally, he smiles at me, wrapping his arms around me and kissing the top of my head. “I’ve never been better.”

Epilogue 2

Mason

Four Years Later

“What is happening, Mason? What are we doing here?”
Mia asks me.

She’s looking around at the decorated room. I have to admit that my brothers and their wives outdid themselves on this one. The place is perfect, and I know Mia loves it. There’s Christmas lights, decorated trees, flowers, and of course mistletoe everywhere. She looks at the rows of chairs lined up behind us. When she turns around, I’m on one knee in front of her.

The confusion on her face would be comical if I wasn’t nervous right now. I’ve spent the last five years loving Mia. She’s my soul mate, which is crazy because I never believed in things like that until I met her. But yeah, she’s definitely my other half. All my pain that I kept hidden, my years in the military and the scars on my body and in the inside, she’s made me feel whole again. The day we married, right after we met, I made vows to her, and those vows are still just as important today. She’s never talked about regretting how we met, or the wedding that I put together at the damn airport. But I regret not giving her what she deserves. On bended knee in front of her, I open the small box in my hand and hold it up to her. “Mia, I love you more than anything. You’ve made me the happiest man on earth, and I want to know if you’ll marry me... again?”

I’ve surprised her. It was hard putting all this together without her finding out. She’s staring at me, her mouth

hanging open. “Yes,” she says. And before I can get up, she falls to her knees in front of me with tears rolling down her face.

I close the jewelry box and cup her face in my hands. “What is it? What’s wrong, Mia? I thought you’d be happy.”

She sniffs. “I am happy.”

“Look at me,” I tell her. She opens her eyes and stares back at me.

“I’m happy, Mason. I’m sorry that I’m reacting this way. I’m so emotional, I’m a mess lately.” She finally smiles and wipes her tears. “I thought you were unhappy... I thought you were leaving me.”

For just a fraction of a second, my heart stops beating. How could she think that? Mia and our son, Mason Jr, are my life. I pick her up and take her over to one of the chairs. I can see my brother peeking at us through one of the cracked open doors. He obviously can tell something’s not right, because he holds the rest of the family back from coming in.

I hold her in my lap, my arms around her. “Explain yourself. How could you think that?”

“You’ve been distant the last few months,” she explains, blinking her wet eyelashes.

“I’ve been planning this, and I’ve been so afraid you’d find out about it. I really wanted to surprise you.”

She puts her head on my shoulder. “Oh, Mason. I don’t need any lavish gifts or big surprises. I just need you.”

“Mia, honey. You make me happy. I’d never leave you. I can barely breathe when we’re apart. You are such a big part of me, you’re my life... and honey, if you don’t know that by now, I’ve fucked up big time... I’m so sorry.”

“No!” she says, lifting her head and searching my eyes. “No! It’s not you, it’s me... I told you I’ve been emotional—well, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Oh God! My first thought is there’s something wrong with her. My hands go to her waist possessively. “What is it? Tell

me.”

Her hands go to my chest, and even through the leftover tears, she tries to smile. “I’m pregnant. We’re going to have another baby.”

My heart is racing with excitement. We’ve talked about having another child, but we said we’d just wait for it to happen. “You’re pregnant? We’re having a baby?”

She nods, and I pull her in against my chest. “Fuck!” I mutter. Emotion is hitting me hard. I rest my chin on her head. “I wanted to surprise you, and instead you surprised me... gave me the best gift of all.”

She pulls back then. “Oh yeah, my surprise... I’ll take my ring now.”

I pull it out and help her put it on. “That’s not it, you know.”

She’s admiring the ring. “What’s not it? This is more than enough, Mason.”

I shake my head. This woman deserves the world. “No, honey, it’s not. Today, you’re getting the wedding that you deserve.”

She gasps and looks around the room again. “Wait! What? Are we...”

I nod, unable to keep it quiet another minute. “Yeah, honey. We’re renewing our vows to each other. All my brothers and their wives have helped to plan this day.” I lift my arm and look at my watch. “You have exactly two hours to get ready.”

She pulls from my lap. “Two hours?” She runs her hands down her shirt and leggings. “Mason Mistletoe, I cannot get married looking like this.”

I grab her hand and stroke my thumb across her smooth skin. “You’re perfect just the way you are, but I knew you’d feel that way.” I look over at the door where I know our family is at and holler loudly, “Okay, guys, you can come out now.”

As soon as I say it, the door opens, and my brothers, their wives, and our mom and dad all tumble into the room. Mia and I are passed around and offered congratulations. She's laughing with the girls when I catch up with her. I gesture to the women that married my brothers. We were all put into this situation to save Snow Valley, but it turned out perfectly. We've all found our soul mates. "They have your dress, flowers, and everything else you need. I'll see you back here in two hours."

She nods happily. She gets one step from me before I pull her in for a kiss. Even now, knowing I'll see her in just a few short hours, I'm going to miss her. Our lips mesh in perfect union, and just when I try to deepen the kiss, my brother pats me on the back. "Two hours," he reminds us.

I reluctantly pull away. I look into her eyes, not caring who can see us or hear what I'm about to say. My possession of Mia is uncontrollable. "You're mine, Mia. For now and always."

She nods. "And you're mine."

"Damn straight," I mutter.

I let her go then and don't take my eyes off her until she's out of the room. For the next hour and a half, I pace the halls. It's killing me to know that she's here and I can't touch her.

When the time comes, I'm standing at the altar. Our son is standing next to me as my best man. All five of my brothers are the groomsmen, and their wives, having just come down the aisle as bridesmaids, are now standing on the other side. Everyone in Snow Valley turned up for this event, and the place is packed. The bridal march begins, and Mia is on the arm of my father as he walks her down the aisle. She's the most breathtaking woman I've ever seen, and I don't even wipe at the tear that falls down my cheek. She took a chance by coming to Snow Valley and being a mail order bride. And somehow I'm the luckiest man in the world that she's mine.

My dad barely has time to kiss her cheek and put her hand in mine before I'm on her. I know the kiss is supposed to be at the end, but I can't wait another minute. I tune out the hoots

and hollers and laughing around us. I try to show her in one kiss what she means to me. She pulls away and pats my cheek. “I love you too,” she leans in and whispers. “Now come on, husband. Let’s get this going so we can get back home.”

And right there, in front of our family and friends, we become Mr. and Mrs. Mistletoe... again.

Epilogue 3

Mia

Ten Years Later

“I’ll be right there,” I hear my husband holler from the back of the tattoo studio. The woman that runs the front and does the check-ins has already left, and I’m Mason’s last appointment of the day. He just doesn’t know it yet.

He comes to the front, and the stern expression on his face softens when he sees me standing here. “Hey, honey, everything okay with the kids?”

I nod, speechless. He has on his dark jeans and a tight black T-shirt. He’s still as handsome as the day I first met him. “The kids are fine. They both are parked in front of the television playing video games together.”

He comes toward me, leaning down to give me a kiss. It’s quick, too quick. “Together? Wow! I have one more appointment. You want to stay and watch?”

I walk around the front of the studio, closing the blinds. I already locked the front door when I came in. I stop next to the door that leads to the tattoo booth. I pull off my long jacket, and I’m standing there with only my negligee on. “Actually, I’m your last appointment. I called and had Jessie schedule me in.”

His mouth drops open. I went shopping for this occasion. I wanted to get something special that he hadn’t seen before, and by the way he’s looking at me, it was definitely worth it. I disappear to the back, and I hear his heavy thudded steps

behind me. He slams the door behind him. “Mia Mistletoe, what are you doing to me?”

He doesn’t expect an answer, though, because his hands are all over me. “This looks good on you. I’d like it better if it was on the floor, though.”

He reaches for me to take it off, and I step out of his reach. “Oh no, you are not ripping another nightgown of mine. I bought this to look good for you.”

His eyes devour me. “You do look good for me. All day, every day. Fuck, Mia, you can wear those leggings and baggy T-shirt you like and I’m fuckin’ hard for you.”

I reach for the hem of the baby doll dress I have on and pull it over my head. I let it fall to the floor before stepping out of the sheer panties. I should have known when I bought the thin material that it wouldn’t last long around my husband. When I’m completely naked except for the heels I’m wearing, I put my hands on my hips. “Better?”

He nods, eyes wide as he takes me all in. “The best.”

He takes a step toward me, and I hold my hand up. “Is this how you treat all your appointments, Mr. Mistletoe?”

He growls at me. Literally growls. “You know better than that.”

I nod knowingly. “I know, but in all seriousness, I have an appointment for a tattoo.”

He stops pursuing me and stares at me, nostrils flaring. “You want me to tattoo you?”

I nod without wavering. “I want you to brand me, Mason. Put something on me so that everyone knows I’m yours.”

He takes the last few steps toward me in a rush. He picks me up and lays me back on his chair. He puts a hand on each side of the chair next to my face. “I’ll brand you, Mia. I’ll give you anything you want. But first you have to give me what I want... what I need.”

My body is practically vibrating. “Yes... Yes, I can do that, Mason. What do you want?”

He shakes his head and leans down until our noses are only an inch apart. "You, Mia. Always you."

I lift my arms and wrap them around his neck. With a smirk, I tell him, "You can always have me. I'm yours for the taking."

He touches me everywhere. He cups my breast and then slides his hands down my body until he's cupping my pussy. His touch is good, but it's not enough. "More," I demand.

He pulls my legs until I'm at the end of the chair. He stands between my thighs and undoes his jeans, letting them and his underwear fall to his knees. His cock is hard between us, pulsating and angry looking.

He wraps his hand around his girth and strokes himself. I move lower, opening my legs wider. "That's what I need, Mason. I need you... inside me... now."

He positions himself at my core and slowly enters me. His hands go to my waist, and he pulls me to him as he thrusts inside me. I wrap my legs around him, and he pummels me. "You feel so good, Mia. I think about you all day, and this right here is where I want to be."

I reach down and rub my clit with my finger. My pussy clenches, and Mason throws his head back. "Yes."

I strum my clit while he moves in and out of me. When he hits my G-spot, the orgasm rips through my body in an instant, and I dig my heels into his back. He lets himself go then, painting my womb with his seed. His grunts of satisfaction fill the room, and I watch as the orgasm puts him over the edge.

Breathless, he's watching me. I know that look. He's not done with me yet; he just needs time to recuperate.

I run my hands up his stomach. He still has his shirt on, and he flinches when I get to his chest. I feel the bulkiness underneath. "What is that?"

He's still inside me as he pulls his T-shirt off. There's a clear bandage over a fresh tattoo. I lean up and look at the red heart that's right over his heart. In big black, bold letters, it says *Mia*.

It looks like I'm not the only one that was wanting branded today. "Mason... when... how?"

He shrugs. "I miss you when I'm working. This way, you're always with me... That's corny, right?"

His cheeks are ruddy, like he's embarrassed. My voice is thick with emotion. "No, Mason. Not corny at all. I actually kind of love it. I want one."

His cock jerks inside me, and I lift my eyebrows. "Again? Already?"

He shrugs. "Fuck, Mia, you talk about me branding you and yeah, I'm ready again."

I push him off me, stand up, and point to the chair. "Have a seat, husband. It's my turn."

He does as I ask and sits down in the chair, his cock hard between us. I walk over and straddle him. Yeah, the tattoo can wait...

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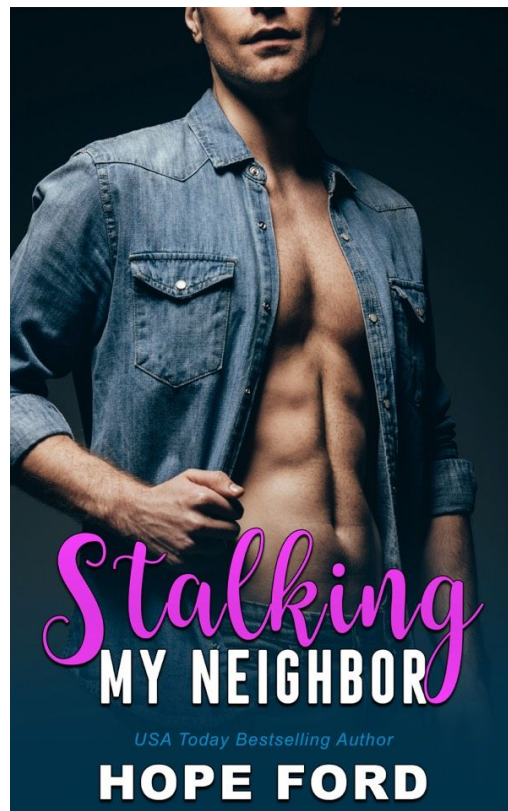
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