



Jingle Bells
&

MISTLETOE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SAMMI CEE

JINGLE BELLS & MISTLETOE

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Takoda Outreach Center Book 6

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Cover Design by Designs by Morningstar

Proofreading by AlternativEdits

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for taking the Takoda Outreach Center journey with me. For me, these families have all symbolized and represented the most significant part of relationships and finding your people. Jonathon and Anson are a little different for me. Their HEA is not really a second chance, but more about how sometimes you have to wait for the time to be right. Jonathon was the only one who helped start the outreach who came from a good, stable home, and yet, his forever stood just out of reach. I hope you enjoy this sweet novella. It seemed appropriate to wrap this series up where it all began, at Christmastime.

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PROLOGUE

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Jonathon

Christmas ~ Four Years Ago

“*W*hat’s wrong, son? You’re usually the life of the party, and you’ve been hiding in this corner for awhile now. Everything okay?”

I smiled and bumped his arm with mine. “I’m fine. Just soaking it all up.”

Yesterday, we’d hosted a huge Christmas party for the families that used the services we provided at the Takoda Outreach Center. We’d served lunch with plenty of sweet treats for the holiday and crafted with the children, decorating cookies, assembling gingerbread houses for them to take home, and making age-friendly ornaments. Plus, Santa had visited with gifts, both practical and fun, for everyone who’d signed up to attend. It was something that we all enjoyed doing for those in the community who needed a little extra help at this time of year, and something that my two best friends, Avi and Fisher, who’d co-founded the outreach with me, both understood the need for personally. Unlike my own childhood, theirs had been fraught with poverty, and in Fisher’s case, neglect.

Today was about us, though. The family we’d found along the way. We’d all gathered at my parents’ house, where my mom, Julia, and Avi’s mother-in-law, Michelle, had cooked up a feast for us. Since the outreach had originally begun with the soup kitchen, several of the people here were pros at cooking mass quantities and had offered to help prepare our meal, but

the two mothers wouldn't hear of it. They said each and everyone one of us served others year round, and they wanted this to be their special treat.

Dad clasped a hand on my shoulder. "You've created a good group of friends here. A family."

I had. We had. My gaze trailed around the room. Avi and Zachary were sitting on the floor together in front of the fireplace, backs resting against the couch, talking quietly with each other. They were thinking of starting a family of their own, and it was pretty much all Avi could think about. Next to them, Fisher laughed with his husband, Marcus, and their two boys, Archie and PJ, whom they'd fostered, then adopted, years ago. Judson, who'd started as a volunteer who also needed a little help feeding his kids, took over the coffee table with his husband, Austin, helping their two boys, Joel and Adam, with the drone they'd received as a joint gift, while their daughter, Megan, oohed and awed over all her new art supplies. Judson had gone from being a volunteer to an intricate part of our outreach and like another brother.

Ben, a longtime volunteer who'd become the grandfather of our group, sat and entertained his two cronies, the seasoned and fabulous, Della and Miss Emma, with another of his wild stories from his pawn shop days that had them shaking their heads at him. Miss Emma had originally shown up with teenage brothers, Archie and PJ, four years ago, the three of them living on the streets, and close to Jasper, a homeless young man who we'd given a job in the kitchen to make sure he was clothed, fed, and out of the elements as much as possible. Jasper had brought so many of us together, and even though he'd moved on to run his own pizzeria, he and his husband, Caleb, were family now, so they were over by the Christmas tree talking with Zachary's little brother, Anson, and his dad, Leo. From the dining room, I could hear Kamari laughing hysterically, and where he was, it stood to reason his boyfriend, Lachlan, was by his side.

Was I really okay? For the most part. These were my people, my chosen family, and they were all living their best possible lives. I'd been the playboy out of Fisher, Avi, and me, but deep

down, I'd longed for the same relationship my parents had. They were the epitome of unconditional love, and I wanted that. So far, I'd watched everyone I was close to get it, except for the old-timers, who'd all lost the love of their lives along the way but spoke of them often and with a wealth of emotion. I was genuinely thrilled for my friends and their partners, and I adored all of their children, but my own happily-ever-after was nowhere in sight. The last five dates I'd gone on had both been lackluster, and unfortunately, I knew why.

Anson. My gaze wandered back to Zachary's younger brother. Of course I knew exactly where he was because I always did. I'd met the willowy, blue-eyed college student with the rainbow-colored hair four New Year's Eve's ago when his parents first came to the soup kitchen to volunteer after Avi and Zachary had first gotten together. He'd been nineteen and had flirted with me shamelessly. Since he was of age, if I'd have met him under different circumstances, I'd have probably taken him up on it, at least for a night. With a witty personality, a positively glowing outlook on life, and the capacity to laugh at himself, he was just my type. Under the circumstances, though, that had been out of the question. Avi and Zachary's relationship had been brand new, and no one knew where it was headed, but it had looked like the real deal to me. I'd been right, and how awkward would it be now to have hooked up with the brother that Zachary, who'd become one of my closest friends, now adored and had grown super protective of?

There was also the fact Anson had become an integral part of the outreach center, too. And much to my dismay—*or pleasure?*—he worked the closest with me since I took care of finances and business development. His exposure to us and what we were doing for the community had solidified the fact he wanted to be a social worker like Judson. He'd picked up on my desire to have a career center, and he'd talked to his advisor, and then a couple of the professors in his department, and while helping me get the career center at Takoda Outreach Center up and running, he'd been able to use the experience for papers and his main grade in one course. Since he'd arrived at my office that first day to work, he'd shown

tremendous dedication and had been an asset. Apparently, I had a competency kink because that had gone way further to get my attention than the flirting ever had.

At some point, my musings must've bored my dad, because the next thing I knew, he'd wandered off, and Madison, Anson's eccentric, artistic, best friend leaned her head against my arm. "When are you going to get your man?" she asked softly.

I sighed and draped an arm around her shoulders. She was a little thing, small enough that she made Anson look big, and he was petite. He actually looked more like his brother-in-law, Avi, than his bigger, buffer brother, Zachary. Well, they were half-brothers, but their bond had grown into something special the last four years. Ugh. Why did everything come back to Anson for me? I was thirteen years older than him. He was just starting his life, and I'd had a fulfilling job I loved for fifteen years. He'd still been in high school then, for fuck's sake. "You know that's not really a thing."

She tilted her head up and batted her long, black lashes at me. "You think he doesn't really mean that shameless flirting? Or that he's kidding when he propositions you?" She snorted. "Trust me. If he thought you'd give him the time of day, he'd rearrange his life for you."

She was probably right, which was why I'd made sure to bury my attraction deep down so that he'd never know. Anson was leaving for a job in the spring after he graduated with his master's degree, and I wouldn't hold him back. One of his mentors at school had heard about a new center like ours opening up soon and geared specifically toward at-risk LGBTQ+. They had a generous donor willing to fund the initial start up, but he needed people who knew what they were doing to get it up and running. Anson's professor had gotten him an interview, which involved the founder and his board of directors driving down and visiting Takoda Outreach Center, as well, to see what he'd help set up. They'd been so impressed by the part he'd played, as well as what Avi, Fisher, and I had created that they'd offered Anson a job, and asked Avi to serve as a consultant. It was an amazing opportunity for

Anson. It was also three hours away. In another life, another career, that might not be as big a deal, but I'd been where he was. In the beginning, we'd worked long hours with few days off. "Yeah, I know."

Her eyes narrowed at me. "Why do you sound so melancholy? You do care about him, don't you?"

I knew how sad she was that he was leaving. He was her best friend, her person like Fisher and Avi had always been mine. Anson's family had essentially taken her in. Michelle had been thrilled to finally gain a daughter when Madison's family had washed their hands of her. She'd been the black sheep in her ultra-religious, super-conservative family, but had grown the confidence and strength to be herself and thrive once she left for college. With that independence had come bold self-expression: streaks of color in her otherwise long, raven black hair, clothing choices that ranged from porn-star casual to 80s hard rock, and stunning artwork that had allowed her the freedom to get from under her parents' financial support when her paintings—many of them abstract nudes—began to sell, and she began taking commissions from romance authors for their characters. Many of which included scantily clad couples in passionate situations. Her family had found her choices scandalous, and her mother had declared her evil, and they'd parted ways. She was better for it, but I knew Anson's impending departure had to be even harder on her than I was barely admitting it was going to be on me.

"I do, but if you tell him, I'll deny it. He deserves this opportunity. How many people graduate from college and get to step right into their dream job?"

I didn't know why I told her that except I needed to admit it to someone, and I knew she wanted the best for him. She was also a bright and intelligent young woman, so she'd know I was right. She released a heavy sigh. "If we're admitting things, then you have to keep my secret, too."

"Secret?" Intrigued, I turned and gave her my full attention. "Let me guess. You're in love with a prince you met online, and you're leaving the country to elope." I shook my head.

“No, that’s ridiculous. He’d have asked for money to come here, so that can’t be it.”

She rolled her eyes. “*You* are ridiculous.” Then she grinned. “But it’s good to see you acting silly instead of sulking. People are beginning to talk, you know? You’ve been quiet lately.”

Oops. “Thanks for the heads up. Now tell me your secret before the ideas in my head get any crazier.”

She rested her hand on her stomach. “I’m scared once he finds out about the little bun toasting in my oven, he won’t go.”

My stomach dropped, and her eyes widened in horror, and she slapped at me. “Ew. Gross. Not because it’s his.” She wrinkled her nose. “Him being gay aside, he’s like my twin brother or something. That’s just nasty.”

Shrugging sheepishly, I said, “Sorry. The way you said that…” I trailed off.

“I meant because he’s going to think he needs to stick close and take care of me.”

Genuinely concerned, I asked, “Will the father be part of the picture?”

She shook her head. “He’s the only person I told, and he said it must be someone else’s. Which, fine. I get it. He’s still in college and doesn’t want the responsibility.”

“Madison, you can force him to get a—”

She placed her hand on my chest. “Jonathon, it’s okay. Honestly, it took me twenty years to get from under a family who disapproved of every breath I took. I’m not subjecting my child to a father who doesn’t even want to acknowledge they exist. I’ll figure it out.”

Pulling her into my front, I rested my chin on the top of her head. “Well, you’re not alone. Anson leaving doesn’t change the fact that you’re part of this family. We’ve got your back. And since you won’t be able to hide it before he leaves, I’ll reassure him that he still needs to take the job and that he’s close enough to come see you whenever he needs a baby fix.”

“Promise?” she mumbled into my chest.

I didn't know which of those things she was questioning, but that was a conversation that would have to wait since Anson stepped up behind Madison and wrapped his arms around her from the back, letting his hands rest on my sides. "Group hug. Nice," he said, wiggling his eyebrows at me from over her head and tickling my sides with his fingertips.

"You're shameless."

"Shamelessly yours," he teased back.

"What am I going to do with you?"

His brilliant blue orbs darkened to a rich navy. "I have some ideas if you're giving out Christmas wishes."

Gah. This man. If only he knew how badly I wanted to make all of his, and my, Christmas dreams come true.

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Chapter One

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ANSON

Present Day

“Crystal, where are you?” I singsonged.

The three-year-old shrieked with laughter from the side of the couch where she hid under her pink and purple Encanto blanket with the casa and all of the characters on it. I’d discovered four months ago when I’d moved into the tiny two-bedroom home that Madison had purchased that this was the perfect game to distract the sweet little girl when she was being fussy. She’d been a little pouty when she’d woken up from her afternoon nap today. I wasn’t sure if it was because she hadn’t slept enough, or if it was because her mom still wasn’t here. There was no good way to explain to a child this small that the last time her mom left, it was truly for the last time.

A minute later, Crystal stuck her head halfway out from under the blanket, so I averted my gaze and said, “This kid. She fools me every time. How am I ever going to find her?”

Her head disappeared again and she giggled.

The sound of a text message coming in didn’t surprise me. It was Tuesday, which meant someone planned to bring something over. I really needed to send a group message to Madison’s found family—my parents and all of the other people who’d come into our lives through the Takoda Outreach Center—that they didn’t need to continue their rotation of dropping off meals for us every week. They’d

begun it when my friend first found out she had cancer. Hell, truthfully, they'd started looking out for her the minute she'd told them she was pregnant. With the addition of Crystal, my Mom had become Grammy to both of them. Initially, I'd teased my friend for calling my mom Grammy, but since I'd become uncle Anson the minute the little peanut was born, it made sense. Crystal had been Madison's whole world, and we only got to be the supporting side characters for her little girl.

Shaking off the direction of my thoughts, I pulled my phone out of my pocket where I'd begun to keep it to keep sticky little hands off of it.

Jonathon: I'll be over around six to drop off beef stew and a couple bags of salad. Do you need me to stop and pick up anything else for you?"

My pulse spiked at the sight of the picture I had in my phone for him. When I'd first met Jonathon Durrell, I'd thought he was everything I wanted in a man. Six-foot four with piercing green eyes and a bald head that I wanted to rub my hands on like my own personal crystal ball. Young me hadn't had a clue. As I looked at the picture I'd saved, one of him cuddling a newborn Crystal on his shoulder, the familiar longing washed through me. The competence with which he wore the many hats at the outreach center was still sexy, but the love he showered on Crystal, the delicate way he treated her, and how his full attention went to her whenever he came around...those things made him appealing in a whole new way.

I quickly answered that I had everything I needed, then pulled the blanket off of Crystal and hung it in the air over her, while looking everywhere but down. "Crystal. Crystal, where are you?" Telling her uncle Jonathon was coming over almost escaped my mouth, but that would have been a rookie move. Two hours from now would mean nothing to her, so she'd be chanting his name until he arrived. Even with my body-sized crush on the man, I didn't want to hear his name as many times as she'd be able to say it in that amount of time. As I lowered the blanket, I said, "Oh well, I thought we'd have a snack, but—"

“Here I am,” she yelled while scrambling to her feet and throwing her little chubby arms in the air in the sign of victory.

Widening my eyes in shock, I shook my head. “Oh my goodness. There you are. You hid from me so well, I couldn’t find you.” She put both hands in front of her mouth and giggled. “Would you like a snack, miss thing?”

“Yeah,” she yelled. Then she lifted her arms. “Uppy, unc Assnon.”

“Anson,” I said as I obediently lifted her into my arms.

“Assnon. Assnon. Cheese, please.” She pointed toward the refrigerator.

Laughing, I admitted defeat, as I’d been doing since she’d dubbed me Assnon. She’d only been one, but I’d been one of the first names she’d said after mama. As much as I could do without being called an ass multiple times a day, I’d definitely miss the sweetness of it when she said Anson properly.

When Madison had first told me she was pregnant, I’d wanted to back out of the job I’d secured for after graduation. It was too far away to help her and the baby. Madison had been prepared for me, though, and she’d already talked to my parents, my brother and his husband, and several of the people I loved and respected most from the outreach. Everyone assured me that they’d take good care of my bestie. My sister of the heart. The only girl I’d ever thought I’d love outside my mama...until the first time I laid eyes on her newborn daughter. Madison had asked me to be her delivery coach, so I’d seen the little one the minute her goo-covered, wrinkled body slipped into the doctor’s hands, and my heart had melted. Madison and I often said that neither of us had truly known love until that moment. That might have been true, but damn, it didn’t take away how much I missed her.

Blinking back tears, because now was definitely not the time for me to break down, I swung Crystal around in my arms like a rocket and made engine noises as I flew her to get her favorite snack. She didn’t really need to be carried all the time anymore, but since her mother’s death six weeks ago, I thought the extra babying healed a little bit of both our hearts.

After she was fed and happy, I sang silly songs while encouraging her to help me clean up. With our large extended family, the kid had to own every toy ever created for a child under five. There were more things in a bin in the closet, too, for me to switch out as she got bored of a favorite, accidentally lost it, or destroyed it.

At close to six, I let her wash her hands in the bathroom sink, getting water everywhere but chirping happily about, “clean hands,” while I brushed my teeth, changed my shirt, which had managed to obtain the stains throughout the day that confirmed I was a full-time caretaker of a three-year-old, and spritzed some cologne on. Then I made Crystal go *pee-pee in the potty* because you know those words always had to be sung, and changed her into a fresh little outfit. As I pulled her chin length black hair into pigtails, I thought again of her mother, and how much Crystal looked like her when I first met Madison in middle school. The two little ponies on the side of her head had been as close to self-expression as she could get away with back then.

To distract myself from my nerves over the fact that Jonathon would be here any minute, and to make the baby laugh before my sadness overtook her, too, I blew a raspberry on her belly and then flew her around the house. The sounds of her giggles a balm to my soul.

Jonathon, of course, arrived promptly at six pm. “Who’s that?” I asked when Crystal’s head whipped toward the door at the sound of the bell. “Hmm. Should we go see?”

“Yes,” she yelled and ran for the door as fast as her two little sock clad feet could take her.

Pulling her back against my legs, I opened the door. Jonathon smiled at me quickly before directing his entire attention on the little girl now screaming, “Unc Jontin. Unc Jontin.”

“Do you mind?” he asked me, then shoved the pot and bag in his hands into mine when I shook my head no. He dropped to one knee, and Crystal launched herself into his arms. “There’s my little love.” He hugged her close before standing with her

in his arms. “What have you been doing today? Did you hang out with uncle Anson?”

She leaned back and beamed at him, nodding her head eagerly. “Unc Assnon and I colored.”

“Oh, that sounds fun. What else?”

She pointed to the ground. “Down.” As soon as her feet hit the floor, she grabbed his fingers and dragged him toward the couch. “Com’here.”

The smile on his face as he followed her was a mixture of besotted and indulgent and it had my heart racing. Jonathon would be such a good father. It was too easy to picture him running around chasing Crystal every night after he got home from work. Too easy, but too inappropriate. Before he caught me mooning after him—something I’d made myself stop doing the first time I’d come home for a visit after moving away—I walked into the kitchen and set the pot and bag on the counter. Madison’s house was small—well, I guessed my house, since I’d bought it from her for what she still owed after she’d asked me if I’d take care of Crystal for her. Anyway, that was beside the point. The big living room, kitchen, and spot for the kitchen table were all one big open room, so my gaze strayed right back to Crystal and Jonathon.

They were so cute together. She’d already made him sit on the floor, while she picked up one little plastic figure after another and showed them to him. Today, she’d been obsessed with Paw Patrol, so one by one, she showed him her favorite characters: Rocky, Chase, Marshall, Zuma, and Skye. Then she started over again. Jonathon’s head nodded, and he gushed each time she stuck one so close to his nose that his eyes were crossing, thrilling her with his enthusiastic praise of her favorite dogs. Even sitting, he towered over Crystal, but watching him treating her with such care while he lumbered over her just did it for me.

He’d been right eight years ago to turn me down. And all the years after that. By the time I graduated, I thought I’d seen signs of interest lurking in his eyes, but I’d signed a five-year contract, and was determined to prove to him, my family, and

myself, that I could make a difference. Back then, the plan had been to come home and pester Jonathon into dating me, if he was still available, once my five years were up. But alas, it had only been three and a half years before Madison had called needing me. She was dying and she'd wanted to entrust the most important person in her world to me. I'd been heartbroken, but I'd also felt so honored and privileged. She could have easily asked my parents or any of the other men that we'd watched adopt and successfully raise wonderful children, but she'd asked me. My employer had been kind and understanding about me breaking the terms of our contract given the circumstances, and I'd come home.

I'd seen Jonathon countless times since then. He'd wanted to spend as much time with Madison as possible, just like I had. Like the others, he'd alternated taking her for appointments, or watching Crystal if I needed to go to the hospital and sit with her. He'd brought meals and groceries and been such a rock for me when she'd passed, but that didn't mean it was time for me to pursue him. I needed to adjust to being a single dad, eventually find a job, and then we'd have a whole new schedule to adjust to.

Plus, just because he loved being *unc Jontin*, that didn't mean he'd be in the market for a younger guy with a kid. I didn't doubt that I could convince him our thirteen year age difference didn't matter now, but that didn't mean he wanted to become a dad at forty. And really, was my headspace even right to pursue him? No, not really. I'd never had a romantic love for Madison, but it had been a deep and abiding love all the same, so for now, I needed to let it go and just graciously accept the friendship he'd been so freely giving all these years. Maybe then, I'd have the courage to ask him to stay and share a meal with me. Friends. That would be enough, right?

Chapter Two

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JONATHON

It had been two days since I dropped off food for Anson and Crystal. Two days since I saw the purple and blue rings of exhaustion under his eyes. Two days since I saw what everyone else had seen the last six weeks if they caught him off-guard. Yeah, I'd texted him to check in since the dinner after the memorial service for Madison. I'd even seen him at my mother's house when he and his mom, Michelle, came over for dinner with the baby. Last week, he and his mom had stopped at the outreach to pick up Zachary and Avi for a quick lunch, so I'd caught a glimpse of him then and been able to cuddle my best girl close. So yeah, I'd seen him. But yesterday, he'd forgotten to apply the coating of make-up that he usually wouldn't be caught dead without right now.

He'd always enjoyed wearing it, and he had mad skills applying it, but since he'd come home to live out Madison's last days with her and help Crystal adjust to him being a permanent feature in their home, he'd worn it every day. In his final years of college, he'd grown to appreciate a light, natural look, but since hearing of Madison's final prognosis, he'd applied with a heavier hand, a little darker than he'd worn it since he'd gone through that Phantom of the Opera phase his junior year of college. He was hurting, and he wasn't sleeping. My gut said he hadn't grieved Madison at all. Unless it was wrong, which it seldom was. Except that time when I'd thought he'd leave for his new job, out-of-sight would become out-of-mind, and I'd be able to finally have a decent date where I didn't compare the poor men to Anson. To his beauty,

his wit, his intelligence, and his humor. If anything, the want had multiplied, missing him a pain that spread out from my heart like a splinter that couldn't be dug out and had infected my whole body.

“Knock. Knock.”

Pushing the papers I was reviewing away from me, I leaned back and waved Zachary in. “Hey, man. What’s up? How are things going over at the thrift shop?”

He smirked and sat down. “Better than ever, of course.”

He had a right to be smug. The thrift store was his baby, and it ran like a well-oiled machine. Initially, we'd only hoped for it to be another revenue stream on top of the fundraising we already did. The goal had been to serve more meals at the soup kitchen and help fund the pantry. The care that Zachary had taken with the donations from the community, plus the excellent training he'd provided to the volunteers on how to recognize valuable pieces and deliver great customer service, had given us an excellent reputation. We'd gained new donors and more volunteers for all of the other programs and projects the little store had helped provide.

“I don't even know why I asked.” We smiled at each other, but there was a weary glint in his eyes that I hadn't seen since his original days here, back before he and Avi coupled up. “Is something wrong?”

He chewed his bottom lip, then leaned forward, planting his elbows on his knees. “I heard you had the food drop for my brother the other day.” I nodded. “How does he look?”

The urge to protect Anson from Zachary in over-protective big brother mode rose up, but I squashed it down. Zachary was one of my closest friends. We were family. Anything he did or said to his brother was out of a place of love, and honestly, I thought we should all be concerned. “Not too good, in my opinion.”

He ran his hand back through his hair and blew out a harsh breath. “That’s what I thought. I need to try to get over there more.”

“Uh. How? You two have a lot on your plates, as it is.” Avi and Zachary’s road to parenting hadn’t been an easy or smooth one, but nine months ago, they’d been blessed with the sweetest twins in the world. They’d named their first born little boy Zachary Jr., and they’d gone with Anastasia for the precious sister who’d been brought into the world following him.

“We do, but maybe I can cut down on my hours here. The place is practically running itself at this point.”

That wasn’t really true, and we both knew it, however... “Take your brother out of the picture, is spending more time at home something you’re interested in?”

Zachary flushed a little. Avi only came in three half days a week now that they had the twins. Most of his duties had been redistributed, and he was able to handle anything that came up in regards to his mother’s publishings from home. “There’s no shame if you do. We’d just have to make a plan.”

He waved me off. “I know we need to hire another social worker before we do anything else. Maybe after we do that, we can discuss it again. Avi’s handling the kids like a boss when he’s at home during the day with them, and the babies are at the childcare center in the building while he’s working. We can’t really ask for a better situation than what we have.”

Unless it wasn’t what he wanted anymore. Family was important to all of us, but especially to him and Avi. They’d both lost their mothers on the younger side of adulthood, and it had hit them again how hard that was when they’d brought their children home. Luckily, Zachary’s relationship with his step-mom had grown into a beautiful friendship, and a couple of years ago, he’d begun to call her mom. They also had my mom and the two older ladies who considered us their grandchildren, but that wasn’t the same. I’d been fortunate. I still had two steady, reliable parents who loved me to a distraction and had more than enough room in their hearts for my friends. “What about Archie?”

Zachary’s gaze jumped to mine, startled. “What about him?”

“Would you say he can handle even half your job duties?” Archie was Fisher and Marcus’ oldest son. He’d begun helping out in the thrift shop eight years ago at nineteen, and he’d never missed a week since. Every Wednesday like clockwork.

“I think he could take it over and run the whole thing with minimal training, but I didn’t think Fisher wanted him to feel like he had to devote his life here, too.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “If Fisher thinks Archie needs anyone to twist his arm to work here, he’s not paying attention. We really do need to get someone in here to help Judson out first, so let’s backburner this for now, but think about it. If not Archie, we can find someone. I don’t want you to feel trapped here. Loving this place doesn’t mean having a ball and chain around your ankle.”

It was his turn to make the bullshit face. “Says the man who works more than any of us.”

I shrugged. What was I going to say? Since your brother left my life has felt kind of bleak and empty? That I want what all of them have—a partner and kids. Should I tell him how cruising the bar makes me feel old and pathetic or maybe I could tell him that I was waiting for Anson to get through his grieving period so that I could finally make my move. Yeah, he’d probably love that one.

Zachary stood up and walked around his chair, then stopped and braced himself on the back. “Listen, I actually did come in here for a reason that didn’t have anything to do with me.”

“I figured. What’s up?”

“Avi’s going to talk to you about hiring my brother to help out Judson. I think he’d be great for the job, considering he has his MSW and he’s already run a place like this, he’d be the ideal candidate.”

“He really would,” I agreed with excitement. Part of the reason we were having a hard time finding someone was the pay was pretty lousy. We had plenty of people willing to volunteer, but their schedules were too irregular, so Judson

couldn't really ask them to take on any specific task. He'd been scheduling the counselors we brought in, as well as managing our childcare center for years. Everything had only gotten bigger, and we needed to start taking things off his plate. For now, we only planned on offering part-time pay, so needless to say, we didn't have professionals pounding down our doors.

"But..."

"But?" I asked, curious to why he was hemming and hawing. Anson really would be perfect for the job if he was willing. Hell, with the experience he'd gained the last three years, he could actually take over my job. You know, if I planned to leave, which I didn't. But he'd be able to get out of the house a little, which Madison had always thought was important for her mental health, and we'd provide care for Crystal. She'd been in the childcare center plenty of times over the years, and she loved it there, so that wouldn't be a problem. The only thing was, Anson had worked out a way to stay home with Crystal for a year, so he might not be interested in working before that time was up.

Zachary puffed out a breath. "Look, I'm just going to say it. If you don't plan on pulling your head out of your ass and making my little brother yours, I'd prefer you pull yourself off the rotation for going over to help them out, and I'd rather you tell Avi no as far as offering Anson a job. He doesn't need to be pining after you on top of everything else he has going on."

What? "I, uh..."

Zachary held up a hand. "Listen, I'm not saying you did anything wrong. If you'd gone after him in the beginning, I'd have probably kicked your ass." His gaze darted over to my biceps. "I'd have tried, anyway. But by the time he was finishing up his master's degree, even I was pulling for you two to get together. You worked well together, and you seemed to, I don't know, click. Then he got the job out of state, and it was a great opportunity for him, so...it really did work out for the best you guys never got together, but... He's been through enough losing Madison, and he's a dad now. I don't want him

to settle back into having his heart set on you if you're not interested."

I choked on the chuckle that threatened to come barrelling out. *Not interested?* Was he kidding me? If Anson was willing to give me the time of day after blowing him off for all those years, I had every intention of making him mine. Him and Crystal. I was tempted to lay my cards on the table with Zachary. Let him know exactly where I stood. Without Madison, the only person I'd had to confide in regarding my feelings for Anson and how much I'd missed him, it had been hard. Hard to know he was so close and hurting and not go over and take care of him. Hard not to text him fifty times a day to check in on them, make sure that they were both sleeping well and eating. Hard to not beg him to forgive me for not taking a chance years ago that I'd be enough, that we'd figure it out together, and plead with him for his heart now.

But I'd told Madison that I was going to wait and give Anson and Crystal bonding time. She'd thought I was being silly, but then, every time he'd come home to visit, she'd said, "Get your man, already." She'd had plenty of ideas about how we could make it work long distance. In the deepest hours of the night, I'd even questioned leaving my outreach and heading up to volunteer at his. In the end, I'd done nothing. I'd wanted to give him a chance to find himself, and more days than not, I'd regretted that.

Then Madison had needed him, and he'd come home as fast as they could hire and train someone else. He'd left Takoda a young man, fresh-faced, excited and free, and come home a man ready and focused to do whatever needed to be done. He'd come home ready to give up the life of a single man and be a devoted father. I'd been glad I'd kept my interest hidden then, so I wasn't another thing on his plate, and staring at his older brother, I knew that once I confessed my truth, it needed to be to Anson first.

"I'll think about it while I wait for Avi to bring it up to me. I promise you, though, I have no intention of hurting your brother." Any further than my pretending his feelings weren't real might have already.

Zachary smiled sheepishly. “I know that, man. I do. And I felt stupid even wanting to talk to you about this but...”

“But he’s your brother, and you love him. I’d have done the same thing in your shoes.”

“Thanks.” He saluted me and left the room.

Other than worrying that Anson might not want me now that I was getting older and he’d had time to grow up and head out on his own, I hadn’t been too worried about how people would react if we did get together. Our moms were practically best friends now, so they’d be thrilled. I didn’t give a shit if other people cared about our age difference, but I had still been a little concerned it would cause an issue between me and Zachary. Now that I knew he’d support us, I had to decide how to proceed from here. I didn’t want to rush Anson into a relationship with me, but I did want to make sure he was taking care of himself, and right now, he wasn’t. So where did I go from here?

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Chapter Three

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ANSON

“*H*ey, Mom, I’m home,” I whispered as I came up behind her washing dishes at the kitchen sink. I’d left her with Crystal while I went for an interview for a part-time job.

Mom turned off the water and spun around. “Hey, honey. How’d it go?”

I shrugged. It didn’t really matter if they liked me or not. I’d asked plenty of questions and none of their answers made me feel like it would be a good fit. When I’d set up the interview, I’d wanted a little something to do to get out of the house a little bit, but it had to be worthy of the time I’d be leaving Crystal. I didn’t need the money, so it gave me the option to be picky. Halfway through the question and answers, I’d known that very little would be worth leaving her. “The little one’s still asleep?”

The clock in my car had read 4:30pm when I got out, so it was a little late for her to still be napping. “Yeah. She didn’t go down for me as easily as usual. She kept handing me another book and going, *More, Grammy. Pease*. How the hell was I supposed to resist that?”

Pulling her into a hug, I teased, “You’re a big ol’ softie. Where was this sweet, kind lady when I was growing up?”

“Hey.” She leaned back and swatted my chest. “Also, something’s wrong with your dryer, so I called Jonathon, and he should be here any time to see if he can fix it.”

My eyes widened as I took a step back. “Why’d you call Jonathon?”

She blinked at me and tilted her head. “Uh, because you don’t have the first clue how to fix a dryer.”

Well, that was true. Since leaving home, I’d only lived in dorms and apartments until now. I didn’t have the first clue about house maintenance at all, but still... “And Jonathon does?”

“He’s had his own home for years, so I’m sure he’s had to work on it a time or two.”

“Why didn’t you call Dad?” Why was I protesting? I hadn’t seen Jonathon in over a week. He’d been texting more than he used to, which was nice. Really nice, actually. But that didn’t mean I wanted him to think I was a baby he had to take care of. Part of going away for so long had been that when I came home, he’d see me as an adult. That had been my genius plan before I left, anyway.

Mom laughed and leaned against the counter. “Yeah, right. Your father is the last person I’m ever calling to fix an appliance. Remember that, son. His opinion on what he can do and the reality are drastically different.”

She wasn’t wrong, but... “Then Zachary? Why bother Jonathon?”

She burst out laughing. “You think calling your brother is less bothersome than Jonathon. You remember that your brother has nine-month-old twins at home, right?”

Ugh. Yeah. “True. I should video message him. I haven’t seen the kids in days.”

She crossed the room and plucked her purse off the kitchen table. “You should do that. They’re adorable. Such happy babies. I think I’ll head over there and see if Avi wants to take a nap or run errands. It’s been a couple days since I saw them, which is entirely unacceptable. Give Crystal hugs from me when she wakes up, okay?”

“Wait. You’re leaving?” She was the one who called Jonathon, and now she planned to leave me here by myself? I wasn’t

prepared. I needed at least an hour to get in the right headspace before seeing him. I didn't want to make a fool out of myself.

"I am," she said as a knock sounded at the door. She craned her neck to wink at me over her shoulder. "And none too soon, it would appear."

Say what?

She opened the door. "Jonathon, perfect timing. I need to run, but Anson's home. The darn dryer starts but then cuts right off. Hopefully, you can figure out why." Then she breezed out the door and out to her car.

Jonathon watched her go and turned to me with a frown. "Is she okay?"

Waving him off, I said, "Yeah, she's on her way to see Zach Jr. and Anastasia, so... You know how all those grandmas get."

He chuckled softly. "I do. My mom is a menace when she knows any of the kids are coming over. She cleans like royalties coming and cooks like she's feeding a football team after a day-long practice, and that's when they're still on the bottle."

"I hear ya." I laughed, too, thinking of all the times Madison had called me to promise me she wasn't trying to take advantage of my mom, but that she wouldn't quit making her stuff, coming over to babysit and kicking her out of the house, or stealing Crystal away for an afternoon adventure, even when she was still so small that she slept a majority of the time.

We both quieted and stared at each other. I wasn't sure what to say or do, but I couldn't move from the concentrated way his gaze trailed over my face and down over my charcoal suit, with my light gray shirt and purple and gray striped tie. I knew I looked good. I'd gone to an interview, so I'd made sure I was dressed to impress, but having Jonathon look at me like this. So thoroughly. It felt different than the other times that he'd said he liked my clothes or a new haircut. It had been awhile since I'd hooked up with anyone, but it seemed like there was desire hidden in those green orbs. No, surely not. That had to

be wishful thinking. I hadn't put my plan to make Jonathon see me as a grown-ass man who wanted to love him and fuck him into motion yet.

“Unc Assnon. Gammy. Unc Assnon. Gammy.”

Crystal's voice floated down the hallway from where the two bedrooms were located. Side-stepping toward the hall, I hooked a thumb in that direction. “I guess I should go get her.”

His lips curled up. “Go ahead, Unc Asssssnon. I'll head into your laundry room and see what I can do.”

I bobbed my head like an idiot. “Okay, Madison's tools—”

He made a shooping motion with both hands. “I know where they are. Go ahead and go get my little love.”

Since she was now screaming my name, I started yelling that I was coming. She stood at the little gate in the doorway of her room with one big tear running down her cheek. The minute she saw me, she lit up. “Hello, miss thing. How did you sleep? Do you have to go pee pee?”

She snuggled her face into the crook of my neck as soon as I lifted her up. “Yes, please.”

Whether she'd said yes or not, that was always our first stop after naptime, so I took her in and waited until she was done and we were washing our hands to surprise her. “Guess who's here?”

She gave me the most disgusted look I'd ever seen on a small child, and I almost burst into crying laughter. Madison had never told me who Crystal's father was, but her every look and mannerism were all her mom. It caught me off guard every time I caught a glimpse of my friend in her child, but it also warmed my heart that she'd chosen me to be here for it. And it was funny how little kids were comedians without even trying. “Gammy.”

“Well, that's a good guess since Gammy—I mean, Grammy was here when you went down for your nap, but she had to leave, and someone else is visiting now.”

Her eyes went wide. “Who?”

I shook my head. “I’m not telling you until you rinse off your hands.”

She scrambled to get the soap off, then made a halfass attempt to dry them, then flipped the little hand towel at me and went running. I rinsed and dried my own before taking advantage of another adult being here and running to my room to change into gray sweats and a t-shirt. It would be time to make dinner as soon as Jonathon left, so I might as well be comfortable. The two of them were sitting on the kitchen floor singing the Itsy Bitsy Spider by the time I came out. When they reached the end, before Crystal could demand they do it again, Jonathon pointed toward the laundry room. “I don’t know what exactly was happening when Michelle ran the dryer, but it’s been running since I turned it on when I first got back here.”

Sure enough, I heard the hum of the machine. “I’m not sure. It worked last night when I did laundry.” All the damn laundry. Inwardly, I groaned. What was my mom up to? There shouldn’t have been anything for her to wash. “Let me go check.” A quick confirmation of the washer and dryer confirmed my suspicion. No wet clothes or anything else. Had Jonathon noticed? I’d never been a subtle kid, so my parents had been well aware of my crush on my Jonathon, but I’d kept it under wraps since I’d returned home. That being said, what was my mom up to? And did she honestly think I needed her to play matchmaker?

Chapter Four

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JONATHON

Giving my mom the stink eye, I picked up the baking dish she'd called me to come pick up for her and deliver to Anson's. "So you expect me to believe that you, the calendar queen, accidentally scheduled a girl's night out with Anson's mom, who would probably love to go with you to see her son and grandbaby, the same night you're supposed to drop off food and you can't do it?"

Mom didn't meet my eyes, waving her arms around like they were on fire, and she needed to put the flames out. Which, news alert, that wouldn't have helped. "Well, of course Michelle and I always love to go over and visit the two of them, but we made a nail appointment and a dinner reservation following it, so we won't have time. I cooked the meal, so it's not like you have to do anything but run it over."

I turned to my dad who was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a beer and scrolling on his phone. "And you couldn't help mom out why?"

He barely flicked a glance in my direction. "She didn't ask me to."

"What are you up to, old lady?"

Planting her hands on her hips, she glared at me. "Well, I never. If you don't care that Anson's expecting food and now he'll have to cook for them himself, then you can be the one to call him and tell him that you're too busy and I'll have to drop it off tomorrow."

Instead of responding, I kissed her on the cheek and headed for the door with the dish and the plastic bag that had been beside it. It was more than obvious what both Anson's mom and my mom were up to. It had only been a few days since the emergency dryer incident had occurred. When I'd gone into the laundry room, the first thing I'd done was open the appliance to make sure no clothes were stuck in the door and keeping it from staying closed. Imagine my surprise when it was completely void of clothing, towels, or anything else that might need to be dried. I'd checked the washing machine, as well, and it had been equally empty.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that Anson had drawn the same conclusion that I had when he emerged from checking himself with flaming red cheeks. Part of me had wanted to tease him or ask him why he thought his mom had lured me to his home, but he'd looked so embarrassed and that wasn't how I wanted a relationship between us to begin. Instead, I'd kept singing with Crystal until he'd gotten their dinner ready. He'd hinted at me staying, but he hadn't been able to meet my eyes, so I'd begged off with an excuse of going back to help them close up the soup kitchen. It had been a long time since I'd had to do anything like that with the long-term volunteer staff that we'd cultivated, but he didn't know that, and I really couldn't stand him being so mortified.

Now here I was again, headed to his house for a reason concocted by one of our moms. This time, I knew it was a setup though, so I planned to take full advantage of the situation. No sense in wasting a golden opportunity to spend more time with the two people I wanted to be around more than anyone else. Hopefully, he'd have those gray sweatpants on again. He had such a sweet-ass little body, and they'd done it justice.

His startled expression as he answered the door made it clear that my mom hadn't given him a heads up that it was me coming instead of her, so I did what I'd done the last time I brought him food. I handed it off with a, "Our moms had plans tonight so I'm playing delivery boy," and picked up Crystal to give him a minute to collect himself. "How's my little love?"

“Unc Jontin. Hello.” The black-haired beauty blinked her incredibly long lashes at me just like her mom used to do when she wanted something.

Oh, this one was going to give all of the adults in her life a run for their money. Her mom had been a force to be reckoned with, even though she’d never received the loving care she should have from her family. But Crystal was lavished with attention, words of praise, and love, and I foresaw her growing up to have the drive of her mom on steroids. “What are you doing?”

She cupped my face between her two hands. “I play with dyooo.”

It sucked knowing that sooner than later she’d grow up and say *you* like she was supposed to. I’d miss her special way of speaking, but like all kids, those cute mispronunciations would disappear one word at a time. “Sure. What do you want to play?”

“Play doh,” she screamed, clapping her hands.

“That sounds like fun. Let’s go to the kitchen and get out your playmate. Would you like to make hair or animals?”

“Food.”

“Food? Are you hungry?”

She tilted her little head and squeezed her eyes shut before full belly laughing. I glanced at Anson where he stood at the counter unpacking the food. “What did I say?”

He shook his head. “We were on speaker phone with my brother last night, and he was telling me how right after he got done cleaning up Anastasia, Jr. peed on him. Apparently, it was the worst diaper they’d seen yet, and Avi had started changing her, but took one look and started gagging so Zachary finished, only to have his son use his chest as target practice. I laughed so hard at my brother’s disgusted tone, that he started laughing, and then she did, too. Which only made us laugh harder since she didn’t have any idea what was going on. I was crying by the time I got myself under control. Since

then, she keeps doing it, which makes me crack up, and then she does it more. It's been a huge cycle of hilarity today."

His story made me chuckle, and then Crystal amped it up, and Anson groaned. "This is going to be a thing that lasts forever, isn't it?"

"There are worse things."

"True."

I pulled out Crystal's Play doh bin, which got her to quiet down immediately as she started pulling out different colored tubs and the toys to manipulate it. "Sit, unc Jontin," she said, pointing at the chair next to her. I sat obediently, and she pushed a little toy press in front of me while she pulled out molds of eggs, peas, and a little round cake. Ah, she wanted to make food.

"Are we going to make food while uncle Anson heats up your dinner?"

She nodded with such enthusiasm her chin hit her chest. "Yessss. For you."

"Oh, you're making me dinner?"

"Uh huh."

I glanced up at Anson with a smile that fell when he stared at me funny. "Anson?"

"You could stay, you know? For dinner, I mean. Not her fake food either." His cheeks flamed. "Obviously. Your mom sent plenty of chicken and broccoli."

Now he had my attention. While opening the little tubs of Play doh for Crystal, I asked, "Is it the chicken and broccoli in that sweet brown sauce?"

He dipped a finger into the dish and stuck it in his mouth, licking the sauce off his finger with a moan. Damn, that was sexy. "I don't think she's ever made this for me before. It's delicious."

My sneaky, sneaky mother. I'd have to buy her a present and give her a big kiss. "It's my favorite."

“Oh.” He turned to the cupboard and lifted out another plate.
“So you’ll stay then?”

“You couldn’t kick me out if you tried.”

His cheeks pinkened back up, and he bent his head down, but not before I glimpsed the pleased smile on his face. “Good. It’ll be nice for Crystal to have her uncle Jonathon stay for dinner.”

I so badly wanted to ask if it would be nice for him, too, but I didn’t want to push him too hard and have him shut down. The vision of his mortification at his mother’s little charade was too fresh in my mind. Maybe they should’ve let me in on their plans. Or was I the one they thought needed to be convinced to spend time with the adorable man? That actually made more sense. I’d made sure to never let on to either mother that I had any interest in Anson outside of the amazing work he did at the outreach center. “Do you need help?”

He shook his head no, but I didn’t want him to feel like he had to wait on me. “Okay, little love. You keep playing, and I’m going to clean off the otherside of the table so we can have dinner, okay?”

“Otat, unc Jontin,” she said without looking up from the red piece of dough that she was sawing in half with her little plastic knife.

I made sure the other two spots were free of her project, then cleared enough space right in front of me to eat. It would work. When Anson brought out her meal and one for me, he smiled at me gratefully and set her little three cubby Princess plate at one of the empty seats and a huge plate overloaded with the chicken and broccoli, salad, and two rolls in front of me. “Thank you.”

Crystal stood up, hands on her hips and said, “Crystal wants food, dyooo.”

He snickered, leaving me to deal with the disgruntled three-year-old while he retrieved his own plate, and her sippy cup. “Crystal wants to eat, *dyooo*?” I teased. She nodded with her lips poked out in a pout. “Then come on.” I held my arms out,

and she jumped in them, letting me reposition her on the other seat. I knew from all the time I'd spent in the house that Madison had a cloth covered booster pad on both chairs, so when she stood on the other one and leaned over like she was going to eat that way, I pointed my finger. "Sit on your bottom, please." She giggled but sat down and immediately picked up her fork, stabbing at a piece of chicken.

"What can I get you to drink? I have tea, water, or I can make you coffee."

I pointed at the seat across from me where he'd set his plate. "You sit down, and I'll get us our drinks. What would you like?"

"Water, please," he mumbled.

"Crystal wants water, dyooo," the precocious child chimed in.

Anson tutted his tongue. "There is water in your sippy cup. You drink that."

I left him to his Crystal-wrangling and filled up two glasses with the filtered water at the sink, then set them on the table, and dug in. This quiet, awkward version of Anson was new and different. One I'd definitely never seen before. It made me wonder if he was on to our mothers, too. If that was the case, I'd take it as a good sign that he'd invited me to stay. On the other hand, I didn't want him to be uncomfortable with me. Talk about defeating the purpose. "Good Lord, I love my mom's cooking."

He finished chewing his bite and nodded. "I'm not upset when it's her turn to cook, but you guys really don't have to keep doing it. I'm home all day, every day. We're fine."

Gazing at him across the table, I said, "In all seriousness, let us help. I know losing Madison was hardest on you two, but we all loved her. I think making sure you guys have what you need is a way to honor her for all of us. We never want her"—I tipped my head toward Crystal—"to doubt how loved she is or that she's a part of this family, and it gives us a way to help you with all you've given up."

He startled with his glass halfway to his mouth and looked up at me. “What do you mean? I didn’t give up anything.”

“You had two years on your contract left before you were supposed to come home. Before the kids came along and Avi and Zachary stopped taking the drive to consult with you, they said how incredible you were doing and how much the volunteers and staff loved working with you.”

Anson nodded. “That’s fair, but it wasn’t the hardship to leave that you all seem to think it was.” He set his fork down. “I’d have come home for Crystal no matter what, but the truth is, I’d been ready to come back for two years.”

That was news to me. “Really? But you came home less and less the longer you were there.”

He shrugged. “It got harder to leave every time I came back. Eventually, it just seemed better to limit my time here and focus on the outreach there. I wanted it to be the best it could be before I left, and I think I did a good job with what I had.”

I snorted. “Zachary bragged about you like you’d brought about world peace. He was so proud of you.”

He smiled softly. “That’s nice to know. A little dramatic, but it’s good to know that the difference we were making was visible. I worked so many long hours trying to ensure it. But really, I pushed myself because it was depressing to go home to an empty apartment. I expected the homesickness to go away, but it didn’t. I was lonely.”

I placed my fork on the edge of my plate. The only time I’d ever not cleaned my plate with this meal was when I tried to eat while coming down with the flu. I’d been determined to get my food down or die trying. I felt just as bad now. I’d been so sure that he’d been living the dream, but he hadn’t? “Anson, why didn’t you tell us? We would have taken turns driving up to see you or you could have negotiated breaking the contract.”

He leveled me with a flat stare. “I am not a quitter. I signed on to do a job, and I was determined to see it through. And I did love what I was doing. It was good to be so hands-on right

from the beginning, helping people I had a heart for, but... The volunteers were from all over the place. We didn't have set schedules yet, and the retention rate was still something I was working on. They didn't really have enough to pay three staffers, so my assistants were local college students getting in their hours."

"So no consistency?"

He shook his head. "I hope someday they have what you, Avi, and Fisher have created at Takoda Outreach Center, but they're still a long way from that." He glanced over at Crystal to check how she was doing with her meal, but she was eating away and totally ignoring the boring adult conversation. "Plus, I was missing out," he said as he looked away from her and back to me. "Video calls are great, but it's not the same as holding a little one or getting to babysit. And then Avi and Zachary had Zach Jr. and Anastasia, and..."

"It was too much?"

"Yeah. I think so."

My stomach churned. Would it have been different if I'd told him how I felt before he left? Would that have made his time away better or worse? Would he have felt more connected and tethered if we'd been in a long distance relationship or would that have made his job even more unbearable? We'd never know, but I'd do my best to make up for it by never giving him the option. "But you made friends while you were there?"

"I did. Most of them were the people utilizing our services, but I have phone numbers, and I'll keep in touch. Make sure they're doing okay. I don't mean to sound like a Debbie downer or anything. I really am glad that I went for it. Now I know that Takoda's home, and I'll never wonder if I let go of a golden opportunity by not venturing out. And they were good about letting me out of the contract. One of the assistants had just graduated and was still looking for a job. He was a hard worker and was still volunteering after it didn't count as credit. That was his hometown, so I think it worked out for all of us."

"Well, I for one, am really glad you're home."

His gaze dropped to his plate, and he peeked up at me.
“Yeah?”

“More than you know.” It was time to start showing up and going after the man I’d wanted for years. With that happy thought, I picked up my fork and pointed it at him. “You might start longing to be away again soon, though. Now that you’re back, you’re never getting rid of me.”

The delicious pink of his cheeks and another smile he tried to hide made me think that maybe I hadn’t blown it yet. I’d let him think on that for now, so I took another bite of my chicken and then spent a pleasant evening playing Play doh while Anson watched me with curiosity.

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Chapter Five

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ANSON

I didn't have one clue why I was surprised when I opened the door to find Jonathon, looking mouthwatering in fitted dark jeans with a deep green shirt collar peeking out from under a soft brown sweater, on the other side. Thanksgiving dinner was at his parents' house, so my mom had told me that her and my dad would pick us up to make it easier on me. I should've known that wouldn't be the case. Smacking my hand up over my face, I groaned. "Oh, no. They did it again. Which one of them conned you into getting me this time?"

"I'll tell you once we're in the SUV." Then he chuckled and grabbed my wrist, tugging on it gently. "Don't cover your face. I've been waiting to see those gorgeous blues all day."

I blinked up at him at a loss for words. Things had changed since Tuesday night when his mom had sent him over with dinner. We weren't only texting daily, but he'd begun video calling me right before Crystal's bedtime to ask about my day and tell the little girl goodnight. It was really sweet and had quickly become the highlight of my day. "Um..."

Something crashed from the direction of the bathroom, and I used Crystal as an excuse to cover my inability to think of something to say. If I'd been honest, I'd have told him I'd been looking forward to seeing his gorgeous green eyes all day, too, but I wasn't that brave. Maybe he was just being kind because I'd told him how lonely I'd been while living away. Maybe he was showing up more because of a promise to Madison. I knew everyone had grown close to her, and the

way Crystal squealed whenever she saw Jonathon was a clear indication of how much time she'd spent around him. Not everyone was as special as uncle Jonathon. Knowing my best friend, it was entirely possible that she'd made him promise to keep an eye on me.

Jonathon sprinted down the hall behind me, and we found Crystal on her little stool in front of the sink. The crash we'd heard had been the cup dispenser, which now lay on the floor with the little paper cups flung all over the room. Crystal smiled happily around her toothbrush, which she'd shoved into her mouth. A quick glance at the counter confirmed that she hadn't been able to uncap my or her toothpaste. "What're you doing, little love?" the giant behind me asked.

She giggled and popped her toothbrush out of her mouth. "Crystal brush teeths, dyooo."

Jonathon's reflection in the mirror showed him standing behind me with one eyebrow quirked. "I had just finished brushing my teeth when you knocked. I told that I'd let her brush hers before we left, and I guess she got tired of waiting. She is an impatient thing. Aren't ya?"

In response, Crystal shoved the small Paw Patrol brush back into her mouth and stared at herself in the mirror while moving it around. In the glass, I watched Jonathon lean forward until his face hovered over my shoulder. "Turn toward me," he said.

As if in a trance, I swiveled my head toward him, stopping when his lips were mere inches from mine. Close enough that either of us could easily bridge the gap. Was he going to kiss me? He didn't. Jonathon sniffed long and hard, then smiled. "Mm. Minty fresh. I approve." Then he stood back to his full height, towering over me, and focused on Crystal. "Okay, little love. How about we put some toothpaste on there and brush your teeth for real, and then you can help me clean up the cups on the floor?"

She shoved the little red and blue brush at him. "Yay. Clean up, unc Jontin."

"That's right, honey. We're going to clean everything up so we can go to my mom's house for a big dinner. You want to go to

Gigi Julia's house and see her puppies?"

She jumped off her stool and ran out of the bathroom yelling, "Shoes."

I laughed at Jonathon's shocked expression and patted his chest. His very large, thick chest. I wanted to stand here and pet it, but that would be weird, and Crystal was waiting. "You can't tell her anything until she's completed the first task you want her to finish. She gets excited, and then she's off and running."

He chuckled. "I guess so. Lesson learned."

Smirking, I watched him follow after the wayward child. If he planned to be around more, which it seemed like maybe he did, he'd find out soon enough that there was no such thing as a *lesson learned* with a toddler. Crystal found new and interesting ways to make me feel like an idiot for not figuring out what she was going to do next every day. Since I'd thought my parents were the ones coming, we weren't as ready as I should've had us because...well, because they were my parents, and I wasn't above asking for their help with Crystal. Rushing to my room, I pulled on my blue converse that matched my blue button down shirt that matched my eyes. In case I was reading Jonathon right, I was pulling out all the stops. It didn't seem like he was in any hurry to make his intentions known, which was good since I still wasn't all that sure which end was up in my life, but that didn't mean I couldn't keep him on the line to reel in when I was ready.

One last check of my make-up, foundation with a little contouring, a light dusting of bronzer and a little color on my lips, and I felt confident to face the drive over to meet up with everyone for Thanksgiving dinner. I hadn't been with the whole crew since the memorial service for Madison, but every member of our chosen family had been by at least once, if not more to visit. It was still a little nerve-wracking though.

Working at another outreach center, the holidays had been as busy for me as they were here for my family, so I'd rarely been home for family functions. Like them, we'd served dinners on those special days that people needed a good, hot

meal and to know they mattered. Once I'd moved home to be with Madison and Crystal, we'd restricted visitors to one family at a time or a couple of people at once. Madison hadn't had much strength at the end, and we'd done our best to keep Crystal from getting overwhelmed or overstimulated.

"Unc Assnon, where are dyooo? It's time to go. Crystal coming, dyooo."

Gah, this kid. No matter how stressed or unsure I felt, her little voice with her mispronunciations and adorable speech patterns, never failed to put a smile on my face and cheer me up. Walking into the kitchen while mentally ticking through a checklist of what I still needed to do and get before we left, I found Crystal all bundled up in her white coat with the fur hood and her white sparkly boots that lit up on the bottom. "Crystal ready. You ready, unc Assnon?"

My gaze moved to Jonathon's. "You didn't have to finish getting her ready."

"Why not? Did you think I was just going to sit here and watch you run around like a chicken with your head cut off? Is there anything else you need to grab?"

"I just need to stick stuff in her backpack and move her carseat from my car to yours."

He smiled and lifted the small pink and purple backpack up at his side. "I shoved the change of clothes you had sitting next to it in. I also made sure the boogie wipes, a s-n-a-c-k for the car, and her sippy cup were in there. Although, Mom has all of those things at the house for her, too. And no worries on the carseat. I have one for her that I keep in the back of my SUV. I already fastened it into the backseat, so we're good to go there, too. Anything else?"

To avoid letting him see how stunned I felt at his keeping a carseat for Crystal in his pristine SUV, I picked my cellphone up off the counter and tucked it in my front pocket, then grabbed my wallet and shoved it in a back pocket, and lifted my arms to my sides. "Sounds like you took care of everything without any help from me. I'm ready."

He narrowed his eyes. “Where’s your coat? It’s only forty-four degrees out there today.”

“Right.” I strode over to the kitchen table and pulled my black leather jacket off the back of one of the chairs and pulled it on.

Jonathon grinned. “I can’t believe you still have that thing.”

“You remember this?” I asked with disbelief.

“Of course. I’ll never forget you strutting into my office after you found it on a rack in the thrift store. You thought you were hot sh”—he glanced at Crystal—“stuff.”

“It was in perfect condition.”

He shook his head, laughing. “So you said every time you wore it for a whole year.”

We teased back and forth all the way out of the house and into the car. We were halfway there before he shot me a cautious glance. “What?” I asked.

“Are you nervous about today?”

Normally, I’d have said no automatically. I didn’t want anyone worrying that Madison had made the wrong decision by leaving Crystal with me. She’d had so many other options amongst our friends from the outreach center and most of them were older than us, married, and a helluva lot more stable than me. Instead of answering his question directly, I said, “You know, when I told Madison that I considered it an honor to raise Crystal, but my feelings wouldn’t be hurt if she thought there was someone more appropriate, she said she couldn’t think of a more perfect father for her little girl than me. Can you imagine?”

“Yeah, I can.” He reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly. “We worked together closely enough while you finished your degree that I know exactly how capable you are. There’s never been doubt in my mind that you were the only one perfectly fit to raise that little girl.”

I held on tight and continued, “But do you think everyone feels that way? Kamari and Lachlan are about my age, and they’ve been nothing but supportive of me having her, but

they've said more than once that they can't imagine raising a child right now, and they've been a couple for years."

"That's true, but I think they'd step up if someone they loved needed them. Do you really think that once Jasper and Caleb's surrogate conceives, they wouldn't take their child if something happened to them?"

Jasper and Lachlan were half-brothers, who'd been separated by Lachlan's evil father for years after their mother passed. Even when Jasper was homeless, they'd kept it touch, and their bond was strong. Kamari also happened to be Jasper's best friend, who hadn't realized how dire his friend's situation had become while he was away at college. Those two were as close as brothers, and there wasn't anything I didn't think they'd do for each other. "I hear you. They wouldn't let anyone else raise that baby but them."

"You got that right. And I think if Madison had asked them, they'd have done it for her, as well. They're good guys with huge hearts and a lot of love to give. I think until you're in the situation, you never know how you'll actually respond."

Curious, I asked, "Would you have? If she'd asked you? Would you have taken Crystal as a single man without a partner?"

"In a heartbeat, but Madison picked the one person who knew her best in the world. She knew that you'd put her daughter first and that you'd make sure that she had all the love growing up that Madison never felt like she received. You can do this, Anson. You are doing it, and we all think you're doing a hell of a job."

"Thanks." Grinning, I said, "In that case, no, I'm not nervous about today at all."

He chuckled and squeezed my hand again. "Good, I'm happy to hear that. Now let's talk about our mothers."

I groaned. "Oh yeah, you never did tell me which one talked you into coming today. I really could've driven us over there myself."

“No you weren’t. I planned on coming to get you no matter what, but I didn’t bother mentioning it when my mom slipped into conversation last night about how Michelle was supposed to pick you two up, but she was worried she’d be late because she was behind on her baking because she was shopping all day yesterday to get those Black Friday deals.”

“Behind on her baking?” I asked with a laugh. “Because of Black Friday.” My mother had probably been done with her Christmas shopping since the summer.

“Right?” He chuckled. “Imagine my surprise when Mom called me this morning and suggested that I be the one to pick you two up.”

“They’re the worst.” Or were they? Hadn’t it been their silliness that pushed us to spend extra time together? I’d bet money that a month ago Jonathon hadn’t planned on giving me and Crystal a ride to our annual Thanksgiving party.

He snorted. “They are, but they’re having fun, and they’re not asking me to do anything that I don’t want to do. So, instead of letting them know that I plan to be a constant visitor at your home, why don’t we keep that on the down-low for now and see how far they’re willing to go?”

Taking a deep breath for courage, I asked, “Do you? Plan to be a constant visitor?”

He glanced over and winked. “I already told you that you might come to regret living back in town. I let you go once, Anson Smith, but you’re all grown up now. I’ll give you time to adjust to being a dad, but I’m telling you here and now, I plan on pursuing a relationship with you. Do you have a problem with that?”

Turning my head to look out the window and hide my smile, I hummed. “We’ll see.”

From the backseat, Crystal, who’d been so quiet that I’d thought she’d fallen asleep, hummed like I had, then said, “Sing, unc Jontin. Sing, unc Asssnon. Crystal sing, dyooo.” So that was exactly what we did for the rest of our ride. Thankfully, singing about wheels and buses and babies who

went wah wah wah was so second nature to me, that I sang on autopilot while jumping up and down and doing cartwheels on the inside. After all this time, without me having to chase him or get creative to bring him into my space, Jonathon had let me know in no uncertain times that he planned on me being his. And finally, fucking *finally*, he'd be mine.

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Chapter Six

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JONATHON

The usual suspects had been at our Thanksgiving Feast yesterday, and it had been amazing. Special. It wasn't like I was the only single guy in our family, but I was the only one who usually arrived alone. Ben, Miss Emma, and Della always drove together to functions. All three of them were getting on in age, so they took care of each other. Fisher's son, PJ, and Judson's son, Joel, had been besties since the day they met, and now that they were away at college together, too, they always arrived together.

Archie was the only other single one of us—of a dating age—in town all the time, but he'd made a close knit group of friends at his job, The Tap Tavern, and he brought whichever one of his buddies wasn't working. They were a nice group of young men, and from the stories that Fisher had shared with us about them, most of them didn't have the best family support. Of course, Archie had shown up by himself yesterday, spent most of the afternoon smiling at his phone like a lovestruck fool while texting, and then he'd cut out early. When I'd asked Fisher what the deal was, he'd frowned and said that Archie would let us know when he was ready. Anson had tried hiding a smirk, but it was obvious that he knew exactly who Archie had been talking to. Since I didn't want anyone in my business right now, I'd wait patiently to hear his news when he was ready to share.

No, usually I was the only one who went to our dinners completely solo, and so I was the one that the moms called to go pick up any last minute things they'd forgotten. I guessed,

in their minds, this year had been no different since they thought that bringing Anson and Crystal with me was one hundred percent their idea. Little did they know, I didn't plan on attending another family meal without them. Walking in with Anson by my side and Crystal in my arms had felt like nothing else I'd ever experienced.

I'd been fielding texts all day and dodging well-meaning questions about what was up between me and Anson. I'd brushed our friends off without giving away anything interesting and laughed at their frustration. Was I that nosey when they'd started dating their person? Probably. But Anson and I still weren't really dating, so I wasn't willing to spell out my feelings for the rest of them quite yet. It had to be obvious by my hovering by his side all day and his sweet little blushes that something was developing between us, but we were in the beginning stages, and I didn't want any of their helpful interference. We'd figure it out just fine on our own.

Anson's mom had asked to have dinner with him tonight, so instead of going over to see them like I'd wanted to, I'd hung out at the soup kitchen until after dinner service, and then I'd come home and reheated some of the leftovers my mom had sent me home with yesterday. We hadn't even had our nightly phone call since he said that his mom usually stayed long enough to put Crystal to bed when she went over in the evening. Oh well. I'd been by his side all day yesterday and things between us were definitely changing, so I could go one night without seeing him in person or on my phone screen.

Deciding I might as well get some extra sleep, I took a shower, then crawled into bed. What felt like only seconds after I'd closed my eyes, my phone rang. After reaching out one arm and grabbing the annoying little noise maker off of my side table, I put it to my ear without opening my eyes to check the caller ID. "Hello."

"Jonathon, I'm so sorry to call so late, but I don't know what to do."

Alert from the frantic tone of Anson's voice, I sat up and clicked on the lamp. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

“I am, but Crystal woke up screaming, and she wouldn’t calm down so I took her temperature. It’s 100.1 degrees, and I don’t know what to do. She’s never been sick before.”

“Oh, love. She’s okay. She ran at higher temperatures than that when she was teething.”

“She did?” he asked in such a small, defeated voice that it scared me.

“For every one of her teeth.” Shuffling out of bed, I headed for my dresser. “But how about I come over and sit with you?”

I expected the argument that was coming, and I was prepared for him. It didn’t bode well for his state of mind when all I heard was a meek, “Thank you.”

The man who answered the door wasn’t the put-together guy from yesterday. The dark circles were back staining the skin beneath his eyes, his blondish brown hair stuck up all over the place from running his fingers through it, and both him and the sniffling child clenched around his middle had tear tracks down their cheeks. Dear Lord, I hoped he hadn’t been walking her around like that for long. While on the small side, she wasn’t a newborn either.

“Here. Why don’t you let me hold her for a little bit?” Rubbing Crystal’s back, I said, “Hey, little love. Would it be okay if Unc Jontin held you for a while?” We all generally made sure to say things properly, but tonight was an unusual circumstance, and her and Anson could both use some babying.

Once she turned in his arm so that I could grab her, I asked him, “Have you given her any children’s fever reducer or anything?”

He stared at me blankly. “She can have that?”

“Well, as long as it’s for a child her age. You can’t give her a dose of Nyquil or anything.”

He tried to smile, but he was too tired and upset, so my joke fell flat. “Let’s go into the bathroom. Madison always kept that stuff in a container above the toilet.”

It was like watching a light bulb flick on behind his eyes. “Oh my gosh. I knew that. What was I thinking?”

The three of us headed into the bathroom where Anson found what she needed. He must’ve read the directions four or five times before he carefully poured some of the purple liquid into the little cup. I held her facing him, and she opened right up and drank it down. “Do you want to go sit on the couch?” He nodded, so I followed him in, then lay Crystal down beside him with her head in his lap. “I’m going to make you a cup of hot tea.”

That earned me a more genuine smile. “Thank you, Jonathon.”

“It’s my pleasure.” And it really was. Not that I wanted Crystal to be sick, but I wanted to be here for them, for him, when the unexpected occurred. I never wanted to see the look of defeat like he’d had when he answered the door again.

As I walked back with the freshly brewed tea, he gaped down at his little girl in disbelief. “She’s asleep already,” he whispered.

“I’m not surprised. She doesn’t feel good, she’s been crying, and it’s way past her bedtime. Even if we hadn’t given her medicine, she was probably about to fall asleep from pure exhaustion.”

He stroked through the sweaty hair on her forehead before standing up and leaning down to pick her up. “I’m going to lay her down in bed. I know it’s late, so if you want to just set my tea on the counter so you can leave, I’ll lock up and drink it after I’m sure she’s asleep.”

The *fuck that* on my face must’ve been clear because he mumbled, “I’ll be right back.”

Unsurprisingly, he was gone more than ten minutes before he stumbled back in. I pointed at where I’d set the tea on the counter, but instead of grabbing it, he stood staring at me on the couch helplessly. Not sure what else to do, I followed my gut and held me arms out. Anson rushed across the room, landing so close to my side that he was practically on top of me and then the poor man burst into tears.

Anson

I WASN'T SURE HOW LONG I'D BEEN CRYING WHEN THE TEARS finally slowed down. If I wasn't so tired, I'd probably be embarrassed. Tomorrow I might be so humiliated I wouldn't be able to look Jonathon in the face again, but for now, just being held tightly in his big arms was exactly what I needed. "I'm sorry. I can't remember the last time I cried this hard. Your shirt is soaked."

He rubbed his hand over my back and sighed. "Well, considering the fact your best friend died, I'd say you had a good cry coming. Don't you think?"

I huffed. "I guess, but it doesn't change anything."

Jonathon pulled back and cupped my damp cheek in one hand. "Anson, love, you have to grieve and crying is part of that process."

Averting my gaze from his penetrating one, I shrugged. "I've got too much going on with Crystal to be breaking down every five minutes. As long as I just keep putting one foot in front of the other, everything will be fine."

"You don't really believe that."

Instead of answering, I snuggled back into his side. "I want to. Believe it that is. Did you know when I first moved back to town, Crystal was barely speaking? And with Madison in and out of the hospital, there were days when she wouldn't even go to her mom. Other days where all she did was cling."

He rubbed his cheek against the top of my head. "I remember. It was a tough time for them."

"It was, and I had to be strong for Madison. Make sure that she knew she could trust me to follow her wishes and raise her daughter the way she wanted."

"What wishes?"

I pictured the boxes in the back of my bedroom closet. “She left her different things. Letters for when specific events happen, like her first heartbreak. Cards for the big birthdays and life events. She even left her journals for me to give her when she’s old enough to read them. There’s a boxed tiara for her sixteenth birthday. I don’t know. I have a list. Some of those letters I don’t want her to ever need, but we know they’ll happen. Heartbreaks are part of life. So are fighting with your friends. But it feels...”

“Like a lot of pressure?” he asked softly.

Another tear pooled in the corner of my eye, and I blinked it back impatiently. “Yeah. I feel like such a jerk. She was so fortunate to have that opportunity and the time to leave these special treasures for her daughter, but I worry that I’ll give her the wrong thing at the wrong time. Or that I’ll give her something too late. Or that I’ll miss one of those events because she’s a teenager, and she’s hiding things. I don’t want to fuck it up.”

“Oh, love. You won’t. That’s why Madison chose you. She knew that you’d love her daughter like she did. That you’d be a true parent. Her father. But guess what?”

Tilting my head up, I looked up into his compassion filled eyes. “What?”

“She knew you’d get it wrong sometimes. She expected it. We all do. We all miss the mark sometimes and have regrets, but there was one thing she was confident in.” He kissed my forehead. “She knew that you’d always love Crystal fiercely.”

I dropped my head back down and burrowed into his warmth. “I’ve felt so cold since she left me.”

Jonathon tightened his hold around me. “She may be gone, but she’s everywhere. Her artwork hangs on these walls, in the outreach, and in all of our friend’s homes. You have your memories of all the special times you had together. Most of all, you have the most important part of her.”

“Crystal. She makes the same faces her mom used to make.”

He chuckled. “She is her mama’s mirror image. And she has her stubborn strength, too.”

I pictured the little girl stomping her foot earlier when I wanted to put on her black sneakers and she wanted the yellow ones with the butterflies. How she wouldn’t let me help feed her things like rice that didn’t easily go on a fork or spoon for her, and how most of the time she got so frustrated that she’d just eat it with her hands. Then I thought about the triumphant smiles that took over her whole face every time she finally mastered something. And because Madison asked me to take her, raise her, I’d get to see so many more of those smiles through the years. “She does.”

We sat quietly for a time, each in our own thoughts, before Jonathon asked me, “Do you think a part of you feels guilty?”

He saw me so clearly. “Yeah. Why her? She had this beautiful little girl already, and I was still—”

“Hey.” He shook me gently. “Madison getting sick sucks. The fact the treatment didn’t work is devastating. But don’t you think for one moment that her life was any more valuable than yours. You’re allowed to miss her. You need to grieve. But don’t undervalue yourself. We all bring special gifts to the table, and Madison’s light blinked out far too soon. It’s horrible and tragic and I hate it for you, for Crystal, for all of us. She had so many more beautiful paintings in her, and so much more to share with the world, but so do you. And you’re going to do great things, Anson Smith. I’ve known that since the first time I laid eyes on you. And you’re going to be a great dad.”

My head spun a little at his fierceness, but his words warmed me from the inside out. “You’re always calling me that. Parent, dad, father.”

He scooted down a little so that our faces were closer together, and his lips brushed my forehead as he said, “Because that’s who you are, love. Crystal may call you unc Assnon now, but you’ve been the closest thing that little girl has to a father since the minute she was born. The rest of us are her uncles, but babies are little sponges. Innocent and pure. From the

beginning, she's sensed the link between you and her mother, and that in itself made you different. Special."

"I feel like I'm drowning, Jonathon. I can't sleep at night until every dish is washed and put away and every item of clothing is clean. If the house isn't immaculate, I worry I'm letting Madison down." I huffed. "You know the day you came to fix—air quotes—the dryer, I'd been on an interview. I know I'm driving myself a little bonkers, and it's not healthy to be so obsessed, so I thought that maybe if I got a job, left the house more, maybe I'd be able to calm the hell down. Stop thinking that I had to keep every plate spinning all the time."

"I get it," he whispered into my ear before dropping a kiss beside it. "I really do. You're putting all this pressure on yourself because you're suddenly a full-time dad. One day you were working all day and then going home to an empty house. Then bam, you're home all day but your work begins the minute you wake up. It's a total life shift."

"Madison made it look so easy."

I snorted. "Madison had her whole pregnancy to prepare and plan for her little girl. You got a call that shook your whole world and spun it on its axis. You only had a few months to wrap your head around being dad and losing your best friend, both at the same time. No one would be able to handle that well or easily, love. You need to give yourself a break. Have you even left Crystal at all since before the memorial service?"

"Only once. For that job interview."

He stroked his fingers down my side, humming. "Yeah, well, no wonder you're exhausted and freaking out. You know why we bring your meals on Tuesdays?"

I shrugged. "I figured everyone knows I eat over at my parents' house at least once on the weekend, and mom always sends me home with leftovers."

"That's a reasonable conclusion, but it's not why. Tuesday was Madison's night. We had the same rotation we have now, and we'd take turns coming over to hang out with Crystal so she could get out and run errands alone or go out to eat or to a

movie. Whatever she wanted to do. Your mom made up the schedule when Crystal was three months old, and she kicked Madison out of the house and told her not to argue. She said raising a child takes a village in the best of circumstances, but as a single mom, Madison needed to accept that we were going to go above and beyond to make sure she never felt alone.”

He snickered. “I think I was the only one who let her get away with staying home on my night. I’d come over and make dinner and watch Crystal while she took a nice long nap or soaked in the tub. Then we’d eat together and talk, but I made her let me put Crystal to bed. That was our routine. I’m sure if you asked around, everyone had their own routine and their own special memories. Let us help, Anson. No one expects you or wants you to do it on your own. It doesn’t make you weak to accept our help, and we love her, too.”

I nodded my head against him, my cheek rubbing against the softness of his t-shirt. His words swirled around inside me, and I found myself smiling as tears began to run back down my cheeks. “She created such a beautiful life for them,” I choked out.

“She did. One that you were already a part of. Quit standing back and trying to figure it all out alone. We’re here for you just as much as we were here for her.”

I sniffled and rubbed my hand across my nose. Jonathon laughed and stuck a wet little square in my hands. “Have a Boogie Wipe. I should’ve given you one earlier.”

I huffed out a little laugh. “No. Your shirt worked perfectly.”

He didn’t make any sound, but I felt the vibrations of his amusement move through his body. “I’m proud of you for calling me tonight, you know?”

I groaned, wanting to smack myself in the face. “For forgetting that children’s medicine exists? The poor baby was in pain for no reason.”

His hand found my chin, and he tilted my face up. He stared into my eyes with such sincerity and something else—

fondness, maybe—that he had my whole attention. “For calling me when you needed help. For trusting me with your panic. For letting me be here for you now. It’s all I want, love. To be here for you.”

I believed him. To the depths of my soul, I knew he meant it. “I miss her so much, Jonathon. And I’m scared. And I love Crystal more than ever, which frightens me, too. I want my friend back.” Then the tears flowed freely, fiercer and harder than ever.

Jonathon pulled me onto his lap and rocked me like a baby, cooing that I needed to let it all out, that he was here for me, that he wasn’t going anywhere, and I let him. And I trusted him to hold me together while I let all the pieces of the last half year, everything that I’d been holding together by sheer will, lack of sleep, and determination, crack open and shatter.

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Chapter Seven

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JONATHON

*A*s tired as I'd been today after sitting up with Anson for hours last night, I'd jumped at the chance to have dinner with him and Crystal tonight when he reached out to me this afternoon. I'd been scared that he'd wake up this morning and avoid me for a while after his complete breakdown, so I'd been pleasantly surprised when he texted me good morning and that Crystal's temperature was normal and so was her attitude, and thrilled when the invite came. It kept me from having to come up with an excuse to intrude on his privacy without an invitation. When I'd left him tucked in bed in the wee hours of the morning, I'd known that there was no way I could let him go even a day without seeing me. Embarrassment had a way of festering and becoming something worse. I wanted last night to be a step in the right direction for us, not a step back.

Since he hadn't decorated yet, I stopped at the store and picked up a red poinsettia for his kitchen table. It was the season to be jolly and all that, so I wanted to bring some holiday cheer into the house. We'd all been a little surprised with how he'd handled his first Thanksgiving without Madison, but now I knew the truth. He'd avoided thinking about it, thinking about her. After his breakdown last night, I suspected that he wasn't going to have such an easy time with Christmas. Knowing him, he'd probably compound it with guilt for pushing thoughts of his friend to the back of his mind during Thanksgiving.

As I lifted my hand to ring the bell, the door flew open, revealing a smiling Anson and Crystal on the other side. It

took two seconds to catalog the fact he was wearing black sleep pants with the grinch's face with a santa hat on all over them. His black t-shirt said, *You're A Mean One*. Moving my gaze down to Crystal, I found the little girl spinning around in pink footie pajamas with red bows and candy canes all over them. "Look at my jamas, unc Jontin," she said, pulling at the zipper of her sleep outfit.

Amused, I lifted her up. "What's this about?"

"It's Kissmiss!" she yelled, right in my ear. I really needed to ask Anson when we were going to start discussing inside voices with her.

Anson beamed at me and gestured for me to come in. "That's right, Uncle Jonthon. It's Christmas time, and elves Gigi Julia and Grammy, harkened to my call for holiday cheer." He snickered. "Actually, they came, and they brought reinforcements with them. Miss Emma and Della tagged along and helped. Ben sent me a text that he'd have come too, but we didn't give him any warning, and he had some new residents moving into the tiny homes today."

I hummed in agreement. Ben had gone from being our main guy at the soup kitchen to being our on-site manager when we opened up our tiny home transitional housing. He didn't need to be on site all the time, but he loved being there for his residents. I had a feeling he was creating another found family over there. But I couldn't even think about that right now. Not while gazing at the merriment before me. A Christmas tree had been set up right in front of the window, and how I'd missed that, I had no idea. It was decorated simply but tastefully with white lights, red and white balls, red bows, strategically placed candy canes, and a red felt tree skirt. It was gorgeous. It also matched Crystal's pajamas.

Garland with white lights wrapped around it hung in loops around the whole ceiling. On the wall next to the kitchen table stood a small table with a three foot tree wrapped in colorful lights and fun ornaments, including ones that Madison had made of Crystal's hand and foot print. The last surface to be covered with holiday cheer was the hutch under the TV, where big puffs of cotton snow cradled the village that my mom and

Michelle had gifted Madison on her first Christmas with Crystal. The little buildings' lights twinkled, along with the working lampposts, and the little train made its way around the track that circled the village.

“This is gorgeous. When did you decide to do this?”

Anson's blue eyes shone with happiness. “This morning. I got up and realized that I'd forgotten to put out all of Madison's cool Thanksgiving decorations.” The shine dulled for a second, but he shook it off—literally, moving his shoulders up and down and cracking his neck from side to side. “Crystal and I decided it's okay that I forgot this once, but we wanted to do better for Christmas.” He stared me straight in the eyes. “I knew I didn't have the mental capacity to tackle it myself, so I called for help.”

I felt the smile spread across my face, so big my cheeks would hurt later, but I was so proud of him. Instead of hiding away, he'd taken my words and put them into action for himself and Crystal. “Well, it looks great. You did a wonderful job. I guess you don't need this.” I held up the plant.

He yanked it out of my hands and hugged it to his chest. “Yes, I do. The kitchen table needs a little something.” They had a tablecloth with gingerbread men and peppermint candies on it. He set the plant in the middle. “Perfect. Our decorating is complete.”

“Crystal helped, dyoo.” the little girl said, jumping up and down like she wanted to make sure she had my attention.

Dropping to my hunches, I held out my arms to her and she bowled into me, practically knocking me backward. “All of you did a good job. I love how Christmassy it feels in here.”

She nodded eagerly. “I know, and now Crystal and unc Assnon and you are going to have dinner that Gammy made and then we're going to watch the Grinch.”

“The Grinch, honey,” Anson corrected.

She glared at him from the shelter of my arms. “That's what I said, unc Assnon.”

We shared an amused look over her head, and then did exactly what she said. He sent her to the living room to play while I set the table, and he dished out the casserole onto plates. Staring over at him, I wondered what else I could do to decorate the kitchen for him. That was when I noticed the mistletoe hanging from the center of the kitchen ceiling. Welp, there was no time like the present. Making sure that the little one was still distracted by whatever toy she was playing with, I stalked into the kitchen and grabbed Anson from behind by the waist. I set him down under the mistletoe, and he spun around to face me. “What are you doing?”

Without a word, I pointed up. His gaze darted up to follow my finger, then fell back down and straight to my lips. “I’m going to kiss you now, love. Is that okay?”

“Finally.”

My feisty man was back. Ignoring his comment, I cupped his cheeks in my hand and lowered my mouth to his, brushing my lips gently across his. He sighed, and I licked across the seam, seeking entrance. Anson opened for me right away, and like he’d said, finally, finally, I got a taste of his delicious mouth. The flavor of candy cane and something unique, something that screamed Anson flooded my mouth, and I drank from him slowly.

“Unc Assnon, where’s the mote? I want to watch Paw Patrol.”

We broke apart reluctantly at the sound of Crystal’s voice, but we’d had our first kiss, and it was under the mistletoe. It couldn’t have been any more perfect. Anson huffed. “I guess our little princess comes first.”

I rubbed my thumb across his wet lips. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

After dinner, we settled in to watch the movie on the couch with Anson sitting right by my side holding the popcorn and Crystal on my lap. “So what’s the deal with the pjs?”

He huffed out a laugh, rolling his eyes. “This is all your mother. They were supposed to be a part of our Christmas gift,

but she said she couldn't resist bringing them when I asked for help decorating. She made me put them on before we started.”

“Aw. They look like something my mom—”

“Shh. Watch.” Crystal pointed at the screen.

Anson and I smirked at each other, leaning our heads in close on the back of the couch and continued talking in whispers. “I'm so proud of you for asking for help.”

His cheeks pinkened the tiniest bit, but his smile was full of personal pride. “Thanks. Me, too. And you were right. They were thrilled. It was like I gave them a special present.”

Moving my arm from around Crystal, I pushed my hand between me and Anson. He glanced down before setting his hand in mine. I squeezed. “It probably felt that way to them, too. They'll be riding a cloud the whole holiday season.”

“Guess what else I asked for help with?”

“Oh, wow. Look at you. You're on a roll, huh?” I winked.

He shrugged. “Hey, it was your idea. And because of that, Zachary, Kamari, Lachlan, and Jasper are all coming over to decorate the outside of the house on Friday night.”

“Seriously?” I pouted that he hadn't asked me, and he snickered.

“I thought maybe you could help them, too.”

I pushed my lower lip out more. “I guess, but only if you want me to.”

Anson caught me by surprise when he leaned forward and bit my lower lip gently. “Hush. You know I want your help all the time.”

By his wide-eyed stare, I thought maybe he'd shocked himself with his action. Since I wanted to make sure that he knew the gesture was appreciated and would be reciprocated as soon as the little beauty on my lap was in bed, I let go of his hand and lay my arm over his shoulders. He snuggled in, resting his head on my biceps, and I kissed the top of his head. “Maybe you ask whoever is supposed to bring dinner next if they'd

mind staying with Crystal for a while? We can go out and do some shopping.”

“I’ll check the schedule. I’d been planning on online shopping for miss thing, but I like the idea of going out and picking up presents with you. I want to pick up little things for everyone.”

“We’ll make a night of it.”

“Unc Jontin. Movie.” Crystal pointed at the screen again.

“Okay, little love. I’m sorry. I’ll watch the movie now.”

She sighed with contentment and leaned back onto my chest. With her on my lap and Anson under my arm, I closed my eyes and soaked up this new reality. One where I didn’t have to shop by myself, and I had someone—two of them—to watch Christmas movies with. A year where it wasn’t all about the events at the outreach and dinner with family, but otherwise I sat at home alone like any other day. I had my own people now, and I was going to enjoy every moment of it. Spoil them with blow-ups for the front yard and special little gifts. We still hadn’t made a commitment to each other, but we were on our way. This was what my heart had been waiting for. This man. This child. Right now. I sent up a little promise to Madison that I’d take special care with her family.

Anson

CRYSTAL FELL ASLEEP ON JONATHON’S CHEST BEFORE THE movie was over. We kept it on until the end, but I didn’t really see any of it, too lost in my own head. I’d slept hard last night after my emotional breakdown, but I’d woken up feeling clear headed for the first time since Madison’s plea for me to come home. Asking for help to decorate my house didn’t mean I was fixed, and I knew that. Jonathon had hit the nail on the head when he said I hadn’t allowed myself to grieve. Every time I’d thought of her or whenever something reminded me of her, I’d pushed it down with the excuse that I didn’t have time for my

tears. The truth was, I didn't have time not to let myself experience the plethora of emotions. The best possible thing I could do for myself and Crystal was be real with myself and... well, be myself.

There were so many things that I'd compartmentalized once I'd agreed to be Crystal's guardian. I hadn't ever felt like I was giving up anything to be here for her, but I had felt like I couldn't be me and be the best person to raise her. The truth of that was in me deciding that I wouldn't pursue Jonathon until I totally had my shit together. When did anyone ever totally have all the components in their life firing perfectly at exactly the same time? Never. But I'd reframed myself inside my mind to have to be safe and trustworthy, which somehow had translated as boring and timid. None of that was true. First of all, I'd always been a safe place for Madison, and I'd always been trustworthy. Those qualities were part of why she'd asked me to take Crystal. Madison hadn't asked me to change one thing about myself to care for her daughter, that had been all me.

In fact, Madison had told me that since I was coming home I needed to stop screwing around and get my man. I hadn't had the heart to chase after him while watching my friend wither away, and I still probably wouldn't have the mental capacity for a full battle plan. But the old me would've been more willing to take advantage when opportunities were presented to me, like when he delivered meals to my house. And the whole dryer fiasco. My mom deserved a round of applause for that one. She wasn't the stealthiest person since she hadn't at least wet something in the sink and thrown it in the dryer to make it plausible, but she knew me. Better than almost anyone. She was my mom, which meant she knew there would've been a time that I would've taken advantage of him being in my space to flirt like crazy and lure him to stay for dinner.

Hell, I had Crystal. She was the best enticement out there, and I didn't even have to do anything. Jonathon loved her to a distraction. As surprised as I'd been that I'd gone in for the lip nibble, it settled something in me to know that the old me, the

real me, the sassy me, was still in there waiting for me to find my footing and keep pressing forward.

“It took you long enough to lay her down,” Jonathon teased from where he stood in the middle of the living room.

“What are you doing?” I asked, noticing that the only light was coming from all of the Christmas decorations.

Jonathon pointed at the TV where he’d put it on the instrumental love songs channel. Then he held out his hand. “May I have this dance?”

Smirking, I waved down at my outfit. “It’s the grinch pajamas, isn’t it? You couldn’t resist all of this anymore.”

He laughed and stepped closer, grabbing my hand and tugging me closer. “Ah. There’s that wicked sense of humor. I’ve missed it.”

It felt nice to feel a little bit like myself again, but I wanted to keep up this honesty thing we’d developed, too. “I have, too. I didn’t realize how much until this morning.”

“You’ll get there. One day at a time, okay?”

I nodded and took the last step all the way into his arms. He left a little space between us as we began to move, one of my hands held up in his and the other wrapped around my waist. We took a couple of steps before I looked up at him. “You’re so big,” I said, meaning tall, as I stepped in closer, wrapping my other arm around his waist. His eyes widened, and that was when I felt it, and holy shit. “Sooo big. How dare you for keeping this from me.”

Jonathon threw his head back and laughed, pulling me flush against him so that I felt every delicious bit of his impressive length. “Wow. You’re really anatomically proportionate.”

He wagged his brows at me. “You know it.”

My own length filled and thickened, and I rubbed it against him, while saying, “Who knew you had such a thing for the grinch?”

He dropped my hand and bent his face down toward mine. “Na. It’s the sassy thing that really gets my motor humming.

That and how efficiently you get things done. I wish I'd been here this afternoon to watch you boss everyone around."

Raising up on my tiptoes so that our faces were even closer, I said, "I always knew you had a competency kink."

He moaned, his lips so close to mine. "I didn't even realize it until you."

With only a whisper left between our lips, I said, "Please tell me that this shining armor stuff you've got going isn't going to extend into the bedroom. If you don't fuck me tonight, there's a serious chance I'll cry myself to sleep. Please don't let that be the way I go to bed two nights in a row."

And that was it. I broke him. His mouth crashed onto mine, licking, nipping, and devouring mine. With a bounce, I jumped up and wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. Jonathon didn't need to be asked twice. He moved toward my bedroom with steady grace. He lay me on the bed, coming down on top of me, and I broke the kiss, panting. "Jonathon, I hate to sound needy here, but I never know if Crystal is going to wake up at night, and I really don't want to be interrupted. Do you think we could—"

He pulled lube and a condom out of his pocket and slammed on the bed next to me. "I'm right there with you. We'll take our time when someone else has her."

I nodded against the bed. "Yes. Good idea."

Jonathon sat on his knees, straddling me. Where his head was bald, his chest was not. "Oh my Gawd. You really have been holding out on me." I dove my fingers up into the thick, black curls of hair and massaged his pecs.

He rubbed his hand over his stomach, looking a tad sheepish. "Sorry about the extra padding."

"Are you kidding? You're even more gorgeous than I dreamed you would be." And he was. So much more. "Is this why you don't take your shirt off to swim in the summer?"

He shrugged. "It's more the silver strands mixed in than the weight, but yeah."

I shook my head. “You’re never hiding this sexy body again. It’s a sin against humanity not to let people feast their eyes on this gloriousness, but they’ll have to keep their hands to themselves.”

Jonathon shook with laughter. “How did I forget how ridiculous you were?”

Detangling one hand from that luscious, soft hair, I leaned up enough to wrap a hand around his neck. “I’ll be sure to remind you going forward.”

He nipped my lip. “You better.”

Then it was on. Our clothes came off, and we pressed against each other, skin to skin. He was so big and warm that I wanted to live under him. I felt safe and protected. We moved against each other, our dicks making nice, and I groaned. “Jonathon, seriously.”

“I know, love. Believe me.” He pushed my leg up and back and then his finger found my hole, circling it playfully while he sucked one nipple and then the other into his mouth, making me dizzy with desire and need.

I opened the packet of lube and passed it to him, making him huff, but he obediently coated his fingers and pressed one ever-so-slowly past the ring of muscle and into my hole. I wanted to rush him again, but it had been a long time since I’d had any kind of sex, so I just closed my eyes and let myself get lost in the moment. The man I’d wanted, craved, maybe even loved, since I was nineteen was touching me, tasting me, preparing to bury himself deep in me. Could life get any better than this?

It could. It did. After loosening me up with three fingers, Jonathon placed one last soft kiss on my mouth before rolling on the condom and nudging at my entrance with that huge ass cock. “This is going to hurt so good.”

He stared into my eyes, more serious than I’d ever seen him. “I’ll be gentle with you, love. Always.” And he was. He worked himself into my body so slowly, dotting every part of me he could reach with tender kisses. Once he bottomed out, I

opened my eyes. His skin glistened with his concentrated effort to take it slow and not hurt me. Had anyone ever taken such care with me? Had I ever wanted to spend this much time with someone, not rushing for climax, but for connection? “You ready?” he panted.

Wrapping my legs around his hips, I whispered, “Fuck me.”

No one could ever say that the man didn’t follow directions. He pounded me hard and good, thrusting me into the mattress, while I held on for the ride. My body sang under his ministrations, and I’d never wanted to come so bad. I’d also never wanted anything to last forever so much. He buried his head in the side of my neck, his breath hot on my skin, and lost himself in the moment, too. That only made it hotter, and I knew I wouldn’t make it much longer. My orgasm rolled through me in a wave of pleasure, and I came without either of our hands on my dick. I bit his shoulder to keep from calling out his name and waking Crystal, but it was a near thing.

Jonathon’s neck stretched long as he gasped into the air, then he filled the condom, and his head dropped back down to my shoulder as he groaned. “Fuck.”

“All the time. I demand it,” I said with a shaky voice.

He snickered. “You and that mouth.”

“You don’t know anything about my mouth yet, but you will. I’m going to suck you down so good.”

Jonathon shook his head, then pulled out gently. He climbed over me and got out of the bed, grabbing the towel hanging on my closet door. As he sat on the edge of my bed and ran it over my stomach, cleaning off my cum. “I’ve been thinking...”

My heart froze in fear for a half a second before I told my doubts to take a hike. Jonathon wouldn’t be here, in my bed, if this was nothing but two guys getting off. “Uh oh. Should I be worried?”

He rolled his eyes, ran the towel over his own hairy belly—*droll*—and lay down next to me on his side. He rested his hand over my heart. “I owe you an apology.”

“For what?” I asked seriously. We’d just had great sex, phenomenal sex, but something was weighing on him now.

“Not telling you before you left for your job that I’ve cared about you for a long time. I just...”

I smiled softly up at him, and put my hand over his. “Don’t feel bad. I think I always knew, but I needed to make sure that I was ready. You had a sound argument when you used to say I hadn’t lived my life yet. As long as I had those same doubts, I didn’t push it. Then I got that job, and I worried I’d regret it if I didn’t take the chance.”

“That’s one of the reasons I never admitted how I felt.”

“I figured.” Trying to lighten things up, I continued, “I’m kind of a smart guy, you know?”

“I do. How did you know my feelings had grown?”

Patting his hand, I said, “There was a shift around the time I graduated with my bachelor’s degree. Nobody else probably noticed, but I did. You sought me out more. You stopped running from me at parties if I flirted too hard.” I bit my lip. Did I want to say this next part? I didn’t really want to know about his prior relationships, even if they were just sexual, but I wanted to put all my thoughts on the table. “And, uh, I noticed that you stopped dating.”

He pinched me. “Yeah, I did, you little brat. No one else compared to you. My friends were marrying off, and I wanted that. A relationship like theirs. Like my parents. But you became the only person I saw.”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. “It was the same for me. So many of my friends slept around, and I was in college, so I wasn’t a saint, but...I’d already found my ideal, so no one else even registered.”

Jonathon leaned in and kissed me. “Then I guess this is our time.”

“Thank you for waiting for me,” I whispered against his lips.

“Thank you for coming back.”

Chapter Eight

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ANSON

“Okay, Crystal. You have to keep a tight hold of my hand inside, okay?” I glanced out at the packed parking lot outside of the thrift store. It had seemed like a good idea to come earlier, but now I almost wished I hadn’t promised Crystal that we’d go see uncle Zachary. There was no way she’d forget it if I turned around and went home.

“I will. Want to see unc Zickry.” My poor brother. She butchered his name worse than anyone else, except mine.

Shaking my head, I pulled her out of her car seat. “Here goes nothing, miss thing.”

“Nothing,” she agreed happily.”

Even though I’d be seeing my brother on Friday, I wanted to let him know that Jonathon and I were dating without the other guys around. Since Archie worked on Wednesdays, I’d been hoping my brother would be able to sneak out for a quick lunch break. What I hadn’t been expecting was to see my mother, too. “Ahh! It’s Grammy’s little girl.”

Several of the store’s patrons glanced in my mother’s direction and then at the little girl currently tugging to break free of my iron grip on her hand. The thrift store had always done well, right from the beginning, but it was hopping like a department store offering a 70% off sale on Black Friday. It was really packed. “Hold on, Crystal.” I swung her up into my arms and squirmed my way through the crowd to my mother.

“How did you even see us, Mom?”

She held out her hands for Crystal, who dove away from me to the woman who spoiled her most in this world. “Mother’s intuition.” She patted the side of her nose.

“Or,” Zachary said, coming up behind me. “Archie was helping a customer out to their car with their purchases, and he saw your call pull in.”

Mom stuck her tongue out at him. “Spoiled sport.”

He shrugged, then held out his hands. “Let me see my niece. It’s been forever. I guess her daddy doesn’t love us enough to come see his little niece and nephew.”

Mom gasped at Zachary’s casual use of the word daddy to describe my relationship with Crystal. It had been what Madison wanted, and I’d heard her trying to encourage her that direction before she got too sick, but Crystal knew what she knew and no one was telling her differently. I’d been uncle Anson from the beginning, so why should that change? That made sense to me, and honestly, I hadn’t been ready before. Plus, she’d been having such a hard time grasping what was happening with her mommy. I sometimes still found her in her room staring longingly at the picture of her and her mother, but somewhere in her little mind, she’d made some kind of peace with it, and gone back to behaving like she had before.

“What did I say?” Zachary asked as he bounced Crystal up higher onto his chest.

“Nothing.”

He smiled with relief, which meant he had realized what he said, whether after the fact or before, who knew? Did it matter? “I will never say Zach Jr. is getting heavy again. You have to come over soon and hold the kids, Anson. You’re never going to believe the difference between them and this one.” He bopped Crystal up, making her giggle.

“I can come by tomorrow if that’s good for you.”

He stopped and stared at me. “Really?”

I’d had such a constant flow of people in and out of my house to check on me and Crystal that I really hadn’t realized what a hermit I’d become. Yeah, I went to my parents’ house for

family dinner, and I'd gone for Thanksgiving, but really, Crystal and I had pretty much holed up. As much as Jonathon had gotten onto me about other things, so far, even he hadn't really mentioned that. "If it's okay."

He smiled widely. "You are always welcome at my house."

"That's nice," Mom said. "You boys will have a nice visit. What are you doing here, though, Anson? Christmas shopping or did you just stop by to see your brother?"

"Unc Jontin! Unc Jontin!" Crystal yelled across the store, waving over my brother's shoulder.

"What's he doing in here?" I blurted without thinking. Jonathon had come over last night, too, but he hadn't spent the night. We'd decided that we'd wait until we'd been together a little longer and everyone knew before we wanted Crystal to see Uncle Jonathon coming out of my room first thing in the morning. I didn't want him to think I was stalking him, though. I'd had no intention of going into any other part of the outreach but this one.

Zachary looked at me oddly. "He works here." Then he chuckled. "No, I know what you meant. I told Archie to go let everyone know who'd care that Crystal is here. Fisher will probably come walking through the door soon, too, if he can spare a minute. She used to visit us all the time, so we miss her around here."

Another thing I'd missed trying to prove that I could do this parenting thing on my own. I'd known how much time Madison spent here and visiting our other friends and family, and yet I'd still locked us away. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't even think..."

My mom hugged me to her side. "It's okay, honey."

"Oh yeah," Zach said. "I didn't mean that as a dig."

"You didn't mean what as a dig?" Jonathon asked as he plucked Crystal right out of Zachary's arms.

I peeked up at him from under my lashes. "I haven't brought Crystal up lately, and they missed her."

Jonathon transferred Crystal to one arm and put the other over my shoulder and kissed my forehead. “You can only do one thing at a time, love. Give yourself a break.”

It was like the room went silent. Which, come on, it didn't. 99% of the people in here were shopping, and they didn't have one clue who I was, but the silence in our little circle was so heavy that it sure felt that way.

Zachary's gaze cut to our mom. “Did I miss something?”

Looking like the cat who caught—and ate—the canary, Mom crossed her arms over her chest. Satisfaction rolled off of her. For fuck's sake, her and Julia were going to think that Jonathon and I were together all because of their absurd scheming. “If you did, I did, too.”

Booming laughter exploded out of Jonathon, startling Crystal before she started her own loud fake laugh. *Dammit*. She'd finally forgotten about it, and now she'd be doing it all the time again. “You guys are hilarious. You”—he pointed at Mom—“and my mom were playing matchmaker. You”—his finger moved to my brother—“already gave me your blessing or a warning, depending on how you look at it. And we”—he put his arm back around me—“have waited long enough to be together. It's our time, and I don't want to hear another word about it.”

“Well, okay then,” Mom said, pretending to be offended before breaking out in giggles.

Zachary snickered. “In that case, can you run over to Avi's office, Anson? He's in today, and he planned on calling you. It would be easier for him to talk to you face to face. We have plenty of help today, so we'll keep Crystal with us.” He made a shooing motion like he expected me to go right this second.

“Okay.” Out of the corner of my mouth, I whispered to Jonathon, “What is happening right now?”

He squeezed my shoulder. “You were gone so long you forgot how in each other's business everyone is. It's a damn wonder we get any work done around here.”

Mom sniffed. “I say that all the time.” Then she giggled again.

“Hey.” I tilted my head up to meet Jonathon’s twinkling gaze and warm smile. “We really do have her, and I think Avi has an idea you might be interested in.” He leaned down and brushed a kiss over my lips, then let his arm slip from around me and lightly patted my ass.

I hooked a thumb in his direction and turned to my mom and brother. “Dating him is way better than I expected it to be, and my expectations were pretty high.”

Jonathon

AFTER HIS FAMILY FINISHED LAUGHING AT HIS CRACK ABOUT dating me, Anson hightailed it for Avi’s office. “Are you guys okay with her if I go make a phone call?”

Michelle smiled. “Yeah, you better go call your mother. Since you have my son out of the house and smiling again, I won’t even tell her that you blurted it out to us first.”

“I appreciate that,” I said solemnly, handing Crystal back to Zachary. I didn’t have the heart to tell Michelle that my mom had known two point two seconds after I’d crept out of Anson’s house early yesterday morning. I’d needed to tell someone, and since she’d risked my wrath by trying to play matchmaker, I figured she deserved to know first. Plus, she was the only person I knew that got up that early. I’d also just left a meeting with Fisher and Avi where I’d told them. If I hadn’t thought it would be tacky, I’d have just put it in the group message that Avi had titled, Chosen Family.

On second thought, I pulled up the thread and texted, Me and Anson are dating. Now you all know.

I watched with amusement as congratulations, finally, and an OMG from Anson all rolled in. That done, I continued on my way back to my office. I knew that Avi was offering Anson that part-time position with Judson. If we’d asked him last week, I wasn’t sure if he’d take it, but now...it seemed like a

no-brainer to me. But with that issue resolved, I needed to call Christian, the owner of The Tap Tavern. Not only was he Archie's real-job boss, but he'd been hiring people through our career center since we'd opened it. He was a good, fair man, and I was hoping we could come to an agreement about terms if I pitched Archie a part-time job to get Zachary home more. I still had some numbers to run, but I had high hopes.

Anson slipped into my office half an hour later. "I can't believe you didn't tell me that there was a position available here. In my field."

"I didn't want to talk to you about work. When I came over, I wanted the focus to be on you, us, Crystal, anything but work." Leaning back in my chair, I patted my lap.

He closed the door and ran across the room. "Do you know how many times I dreamed of sitting on your lap in this office while I was volunteering here?"

Nuzzling into the side of his neck, I blew a little stream of air across his neck. Like I'd hoped, he shivered. "Probably as many times as I thought about it."

He placed both his hands on top of my head and snickered. "I used to think about this all the time, too."

"Rubbing my bald head?" I sounded pouty, sue me.

"I don't know why you're saying it like that. This is a magnificent dome. It's as perfectly proportioned as other areas of your body." He leaned up and kissed me right on top.

"If you're interested in kissing heads, I've got one for you." My cock plumped as the words left my mouth, and I cursed myself. This wouldn't go down anytime soon with the way he was squirming and the mischievous expression on his face.

"Mm, I bet you do, but that'll have to wait. I just ran into Archie, and they're having a Christmas sing-along down at The Tap tonight. Kamari and Lachlan are going, too. Mom said she'd watch Crystal so we can go. Do you want to?"

I leaned back to meet his gaze. "Have I told you lately how proud I am of you?"

He smiled brightly. “You have, but I don’t mind you telling me again.”

Since we had a minute to ourselves, I pushed away my questions about whether he planned to take the job or if Archie’s mystery texter would be at the tavern, and I did the other thing I’d fantasized about in this chair a million times over the years. I kissed him silly.

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Chapter Nine

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ANSON

This had been the best holiday season I'd had since I was a kid. Once Jonathon and I had decided to be together, everything had progressed at lightning speed. We were together every spare second, and we'd done all the things with Crystal this year. We'd made a gingerbread house, baked cookies, frosted cookies, we'd made a wreath out of Crystal's paint dunked hand which she thought was a hoot. We'd visited family to see everyone's trees, gone for a couple of different drives so she could see the lights, and we'd helped out at the Christmas party the outreach threw every year. All of those things had been a blast.

Equally as enjoyable had been the time I'd spent with Jonathon alone. We'd gone Christmas shopping together, ice skating, and then he'd booked us for a helicopter ride to see the lights. While it was only a few things, we'd made the most of every minute, before we both inevitably missed Crystal and headed for home. Then I'd had the time with just my friends. Like Jonathon, Fisher, Marcus, Avi, Zachary, Judson, and Austin formed their own little crew, us younger guys stuck together, too. Beside the original meet-up at The Tap, Jasper, Caleb, Kamari, Lachlan, Archie—when he had time, and I all hung out. We'd gone out to dinner once, we'd played paintball, and other than that we hung out at one of their houses and played video games, shit talking and clowning around. The balance was healthy, and it felt good.

“I still don't get why you guys get Caleb. He should be hanging without us.”

Cracking up, I turned in my seat to watch my boyfriend drive as we headed for my parents' house for our big family dinner and gift exchange. "Are you being ageist?"

"Of course not. It just seems like he'd have a better time with us."

"You guys sit around and talk about this, don't you? Maybe whine a little."

He flipped me off. "No. Well, maybe a little. It makes us feel old."

"Aw, babe. My brother shouldn't feel old, at all. He's only thirty, unlike the rest of you."

"You're such a—"

"Unc Jontin. Kissmiss sing."

I barely restrained my mirth as Jonathon groaned. He'd been singing some Christmas carol while doing dishes, and apparently, Crystal decided then and there he had the voice of an angel. He thought it was funny the first time she demanded I stop singing and let him continue alone, but he'd discovered how very horrific it was when something that only you could do became the object of one of her obsessions. "Yeah, babe. Sing for little miss." He gave me the stink eye, but obediently sang through some of her favorite songs as we finished the drive.

As usual, my parents' home was the most elegantly decorated in her neighborhood. My dad made more than a comfortable living, but he wasn't the best with tools or anything else like that, so she paid to have the yard done every year. The white lights twinkled the outline of the house, and all of the greenery was lit up and had bows evenly spaced hanging from it. Her wreath was my favorite. She had a new one made every year, and this one had blue and red balls with ornate gold patterns on them, small wrapped boxes with bows, and gold bells that jingled every time the door moved. Crystal must have swung the door back and forth a hundred times once she heard the ding of the bells and realized that she had control. Dad said

never again and Mom thought she might just store this one away carefully to use again next year.

The whole usual suspects arrived shortly after we did, plus an extra guest or two, and Jonathon and I relaxed on a loveseat, watching thirteen-year-old Megan play with Crystal. We'd been overrun with boys around here for most of her life, so she loved having Crystal around, and Crystal adored her right back. She thought Megan, with her long hair beautifully twisted, hung the moon. It was a nice break for us. Across the room, Avi and Zachary seemed to be taking a break of their own as Della cuddled one of their kids, and sixteen-year-old Adam held the other. He'd grown up to be the sweetest boy, and whenever there was a baby around, that was where you could find him. He *loved* babies.

"Here you two are," Mom said as she walked up. "Julia and I need to see you guys for a minute if you have the time."

"Sure." Jonathon pulled me up off the couch, and we followed her into my father's study. Both sets of our parents were sitting at the card table he had in the corner. "Is something wrong?" My confident boyfriend sounded more nervous than I'd ever heard him.

"No." His mom stood up and crossed over to us. "Now that the kids opened their gifts, and they'll be entertained for a bit, we thought we should give you one last one that was left for you."

"Left for us?"

Julia pointed over to the bay window, where a large rectangle, wrapped in snowmen paper with a large white bow, leaned against the window. "Is that a picture?" Jonathon asked, confused.

But I wasn't. How many portraits had I watched my bestie paint over the years? How many times had she videocalled me to get my opinion on a commission before she informed the client it was done? And who else would have *left* a gift for us? With the exception of Madison, our whole chosen family was here today. Christmas Eve had been rough for me this year, but Jonathon had held me and loved on me, and I'd managed to get through. Between breakfast at home with Crystal ripping

into the gifts we'd purchased for her, lunch at Jonathon's parents and watching her rip through their packages, and then dinner here with my family, where the rest of them had dealt with tired, *but I want more* Crystal and left me to cuddle Anastasia, I hadn't really had time to stop and think. It would make sense that if Madison left us something she'd want it opened here. At this party. Surrounded by friends.

Clutching Jonathon's hand, I followed him over to the gift. "What do you think it is?" he asked.

"It—" I cleared my throat. "I think it's from Madison."

He startled. "I thought you said all of the things she left were for Crystal."

"Most of them. Not all. And nothing for this year that I knew of. I thought perhaps she wanted to give Crystal more time to heal." I glanced at my mom. "Should we get her for this?"

Mom shook her head. "She said to have you two open it away from the crowd."

"Is there a note?"

Julia nodded. "There's a card, but we're not supposed to give it to you until after."

Jonathon peered down at me. "Are you okay? Do you want to wait?"

"No. Let's see what she could have possibly left us together when we weren't even dating yet."

He snorted. "Yeah, well, she was a crafty one."

"That she was."

Jonathon pulled his pocket knife and sliced carefully down the wrapping paper on the side. When the paper fell away, our moms gasped, and one of our father's whistled, long and low. It was a painting of our backyard, including the back of the house. Running through the grass was the perfect likeness of Crystal as she chased a medium-sized dog. On a two-seater swing sat me and Jonathon, holding hands and smiling at the scene before us.

“Oh my,” Julia said, sniffing. “It’s lovely.”

“Have you two been dating longer than I thought?” my dad asked.

I shook my head. “No, but she’s always pulled for us.

Mom handed me the card, and I passed it to Jonathon. My hands were shaking too hard to open it. The front of the card was of the front of my house, and it said Merry Christmas across the bottom in a swirl of red and gold. Inside was blank except for a simple message.

ANSON & JONATHON. I LOVE YOU BOTH SO MUCH AND CAN THINK of no better fathers for my baby girl. If you haven't already, then you better get your man. I'll forever be watching over you. I love you into eternity and beyond. Anson's sister, Madison

OUR PARENTS EACH TOOK A TURN READING IT, AND THEN quietly left the room as I sobbed in my boyfriend’s arms. He rubbed my back, his touch soothing. “She had more faith in us than we did, I think.”

I swallowed down my tears the best I could. “I’m sorry if that makes you feel pressure or—”

He laid his finger over my lips. “I love you, Anson. You are my true love. The one I was waiting for, even when you were right in front of me.” His gaze went back to the painting. “I think maybe Madison was a little magical. I hope she left some of that down here for us.”

We heard “Unc Assnon. Unc Jontin. Where are you?” being yelled through the house, and I smiled.

“I think she left us a Crystal-sized portion of magic.” Then I turned to him. “I love you, too, Jonathon.”

And the moment was made that much better when our little girl burst through the door with the rest of our family on her heels.

I hope you enjoyed the conclusion of the Takoda Outreach Center. Personally, I'm in tears, but this is exactly what I wanted Jonathon & Anson's story to be. Sweet. Loving. Magical.

If you didn't know, the [Love On Tap: Fragile Hearts](#) is also located in Takoda. Archie's book is next in that series with [Wanted: Tender Daddy](#).

In the future, PJ and Joel will get a story, so if you haven't subscribed to my newsletter, make sure you do to stay in the know. Their Friends to Lovers story is one I've wanted to write since the minute they decided they were best friends.

Signing off for now. I hope you have a very Happy Holiday!
<3 Sammi Cee

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CONNECT WITH SAMMI

Sammi Cee was raised in a family of readers. Summer vacations consisted of a good book while sitting lakeside from as far back as she could remember. After growing up and having her own children, her appreciation of how the written word could transport you on an adventure, bring you to tears, or give you hope, took on a whole new meaning.

These days Sammi is watching her children develop into fine young ladies while doing the things she enjoys most: drinking coffee, eating chocolate, and writing her own stories.

Website: <https://www.sammicee.com/>

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