



RENTAL CLAUSE E

Willow Sanders

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Willow's Mea Culpa](#)

[Broken Hearted Bryce Searching for Sarah Miller](#)

[Meet Presley Murray & Priscilla King](#)

[Meet Lennox Shaw & Jesse King](#)

[Bryce's Birthday Surprise](#)

[About the Author](#)

ONE



IT WAS USUALLY my favorite time of year. Not just because New York was magical during the holidays, but also because my twin sister and I were born on Christmas Eve. In the busyness that was life, we always spent our birthday and Christmas together.

Last year had been an exception to that rule. Upon *my* insistence, she'd taken a cruise around the world with some guy who'd purchased a non-refundable ticket for him and his then-girlfriend, who happened to be named Sarah Miller. My sister, Seraphim Miller, had a close enough name that they'd been able to change the ticket and poof. Away she went on the trip of a lifetime.

Sera had gone on the trip, unemployed and single. She returned with a new boyfriend, and a new career in social media marketing for a radio conglomerate that hosted the nationally syndicated *Bear and Raven Morning Show*. It also took her away from super close Boston and planted her back home in Chicago. Sad face. Because of those two significant life events, I found myself in an Uber from Chicago O'Hare to spend the with my family.

Normally, some time with my whole family wouldn't cause my stomach to knot. The thought of spending a week with her, my older brother, Rex, and my parents should make me beyond excited. To the point, I would count the minutes it took from the airport to their house in the northern suburbs of Chicago. This Uber, however, would sail past my parents' exit and depositing me just near the Illinois/Wisconsin border at the lone Airbnb I'd been able to book last minute.

I knew what this family holiday meant. Bryce was going to propose. After he met the rest of the family—namely me—but also our older brother, Rex. Bryce and I talked plenty over FaceTime, but neither Rex nor I had met him in person. I knew it was coming. It was something I tried valiantly to find a kernel of excitement for. Unfortunately, the kernel of excitement that popped for her also carried within it a pocket of pain over my own life's implosion and *lack* of a proposal.

The Airbnb was an investment in my self-care. As much as I loved my sister and it thrilled me she'd found so much happiness in one fell swoop, it was hard to witness. We'd been in totally opposite situations when she'd left. I was the one with the amazing job at the hottest *celebrity gossip* channel on cable. I lived in an amazing rent-controlled apartment in TriBeCa and had a fabulous Wall Street boyfriend named Xander.

One morning, I'd woken up to an empty bed. Not too unusual. Given as a financier, he worked odd hours entertaining clients and going to work before the opening stock market bell. I went to check the garage and instead found him coming out of our neighbor's condo. They'd

apparently been banging for a good six months before I caught him. So much for all those hours supposedly trying to make the “partner track.”

Because of that, bearing witness to my sister’s new life promised a level of pain I didn’t want to experience, as I just found my new normal. Having to marinate in her happiness for an entire week was too much. Even if it thrilled me.

My phone rang for easily the tenth time since I landed. It was Sera, of course. As if she had some kind of sixth sense that something was amiss. The argument would come soon. I just didn’t want to have it in front of an Uber driver during a forty-five-minute drive.

“There’s a big storm coming.” He told me, pulling me from my practically catatonic staring at Sera’s face lit up on my screen. “It’s going to be a doozy. Though where you’re going, you might be far enough away from the lake to miss the worst of it.”

I didn’t bother reminding him that the lake extended all the way up into Wisconsin, where it connected with another lake that took it up to Minnesota.

“When’s it supposed to hit?” I asked, trying to distract myself from the fact that Sera had hung up and began calling again.

“They’re saying in the middle of the night tonight, but other reports say it might hit on Christmas Eve, depending on how quickly it comes south from Canada through the Great Lakes.”

Great, that was exactly what I needed. I didn't bring any snow boots with me. Just cute ones to wear with my Christmas dress.

"Here you are. Forty-five Cherry Lane. Do you need help with your bags?"

The sweet little ranch was the picture of quintessential suburbia. Though the sun had just set, I knew based on the pictures it was white clapboard with black shutters. The owners decorated for Christmas, despite it being a rental. There were fairy lights twinkling in the enormous tree in the front yard, as well as the hedges beneath the windows. They'd even been so kind as to have the lights on inside to welcome me. That certainly made navigating through a strange house much easier.

"I don't have much." I told him, "I'll be fine, but thank you."

According to the listing, the house had two bedrooms, a single bathroom, kitchen and family room with a fireplace. Not that I needed much else. It was just me, after all. Whomever owned the house even put a tree up and some fake presents beneath it to give it the feel of being "home" for the holidays. I saw Sera's face light up on my phone again. I wouldn't be able to avoid her forever. The master bedroom bath called to me like a lover's song. My suitcase trailed behind me as I threw my coat on the bed and headed to the bathroom. The listing had promised a whirlpool bathtub, and I'd been dreaming about it the entire flight to Chicago.

I'd been living with Rex since breaking up with Xander. I missed my fabulous apartment in TriBeCa, but unfortunately, without Xander's Wall Street salary, I couldn't afford the rent. Rex lived in an uber posh loft in Battery Park. Despite it being the highest of high end, his guest bathroom may have had the boujiest shower ever invented but lacked a soaking tub. I planned to soak to my heart's content the whole week.

Sera deserved an explanation why I wouldn't be staying with mom and dad. It would not be pleasant. A relaxing soak in the tub before I did so would give me a chance to relax and compose my thoughts. I felt like I mainlined a triple espresso. It hadn't been that cold outside, yet I couldn't stop shivering.

When I opened the bathroom door, I was expecting to see the massive tub advertised in the pictures online. The tub was there, of course, but what I hadn't expected to see was a man, reading a magazine, covered in water to just below a set of pecs, humming along to some song playing from his phone.

"I'm sorry... what the hell are you doing in here?" I asked.

He startled so violently he dropped his magazine in the tub, swearing repeatedly as he tried to save it.

"I should ask you the same question." He asked, shaking his magazine out and tossing it to the side before dropping his hands in the tub. I assumed to cover his junk. The lingering soap bubbles in the tub had scattered along his jawline when the magazine splashed into the water. Seeing them there almost made him look like he had a white beard. As if Santa's hot assed younger brother decided to spend some time in Chicago for Christmas.

“You’re in my rental.”

TWO



THIS YEAR COULD SLIP on a patch of ice for all I cared. Having my identity stolen was bad enough. But now, hours before a huge blizzard was about to hit the pipes in my condo burst? I don't know how my number had come up twice in the poor slob lottery of bad luck and shitty things, but I needed something to go right in my life.

My brother, Leo, offered to let me stay with them during the holidays. He had *four* kids under the age of eight. Thank you, but hard pass. I loved my nephews and niece, but I was a forty-five-year-old man who lived alone. It wasn't until I was with him and his kids that I realized how much I relished the silence. Kids, their toys, and the never ending bad-dream-sequence of songs from their unending stream of television shows was an assault to the senses. Even in small doses. My brother was the only family I had. No way was I risking that because my severed nerves made me a less-than-ideal guest.

Thanks to my sister-in-law's quick thinking, there was a much more palatable option. The rental property. Our parents purchased the house after we moved out. Since it was just the two of them, they no longer needed a "family" home. It was

on a quiet street in a sweet little subdivision, and close to both my brother and me. When they'd still been alive, both my brother and I loved its proximity in case they ever needed something. We had renters for a while, but the short-term rental market was so hot we made more money with Airbnb.

I needed to get the house ready for the blizzard. The walkways needed salting, the garage pulleys needed to be de-iced, and the snowblower gassed up, but it was a shitstorm of a day. I just wanted to relax for a few minutes. Sure, a whirlpool tub wasn't exactly a hot tub, but it was as close as I would get. I hadn't been in the tub over ten minutes when the door flew open and the curviest looking firecracker started pointing at me, accusing me of being in her house.

"This is my house." I told her.

Still somewhat dumbfounded that I sat in a tub, naked as the day I was born, carrying on a conversation with a total stranger.

"Well then, you're an idiot because you rented it to me. I have the confirmation right here."

Her fingernails had little ornaments painted on them. They twinkled in the bathroom lights while she swiped through her phone. I couldn't help but take inventory of the rest of her. An oversized gray sweater that looked softer than a blanket you threw over yourself while snuggling by a fire. Beneath the sweater, she wore a pair of leggings and the longest, tallest, sexiest fucking boots I'd ever seen.

"There's a huge blizzard coming."

I tipped my chin toward those pointy heels, keeping my hands cupped around my hardening cock. The last thing she needed was to not only catch me in a compromising position, but to witness a *rise* in the tub. Until that very moment, I never knew I had a thing for footwear but, damn those boots.

“You’ll break your neck in those.”

My concern fell on deaf ears. Apparently proving to me she had a right to be there, won out in the order of priorities. I watched her thumb work triple time, swiping at a rate of speed that had my own thumbs aching in sympathy. How on earth could she possibly have that many emails to work through?

“Ah! Here it is!” She cried, triumphantly shoving the confirmation in front of my face.

Her name was Felicity. What a beautiful name. She was from New York and staying through the New Year.

“If you give me a minute, we can get this sorted out.”

She lowered her phone to her side. From beneath her quirked eyebrow, I watched her eyes slowly descend from my face and down my chest to the water, where my hands protectively covered my obvious burgeoning interest.

“Can I have some privacy?” I asked, trying my damndest not to get snippy.

Her look snapped up to mine, a lovely pink rising on her cheeks. I shouldn’t find that little tell of hers so cute. But she’d looked and liked what she saw. It was in that sweet blush and smile she tried to hide behind a bite of her lip. Despite the

compromising position, being checked out by a woman felt damn good.

“Take however long you need to clean all your crap out of my rental.” She lifted her chin, steeling me with a last gaze before turning on her pointy heel and marching out of the bathroom.

“The pipes burst in my place.” I told her, as I shuffled into the kitchen. “My sister-in-law told me to use our parent’s old place until someone can come check out my condo. Her and my brother, her husband, must have crossed wires or something.”

She sat on a stool at the kitchen counter, one leg crossed over the other, kicking her foot in time to the beat of her fingers furiously typing on her cell phone.

“Are you heading over there now?” She asked, not even bothering to look up at me as she did.

“I wasn’t intending on it.” I told her, “They have four kids. Four. I love the little rugrats but trying to get any sleep in a house of six people, four of whom are all under the age of eight? Yeah. I’d rather sleep on a park bench.”

Her phone rang, evidently someone she didn’t want to talk to based on the rolled eyes and huffed breath she exhaled before picking up the phone.

“Sera...” she said to whomever was on the other line. “What don’t you understand? I literally just wrote you a novel of an explanation. Look, I can’t talk about this right now. There was some random guy taking a bath in my Airbnb that I

need to handle. No, you don't need to call the police. I've got it taken care of. No, I'm not coming home Sera. I'll explain later."

While she continued with *Sera*, I dialed my brother's number. Panic bubbled in my chest as the shock of being caught in a bathtub wore off, and the reality of the situation set in. The list of all the ways my life was not going right just continued to multiply. Would it be the worst thing on the planet to spend a week at my brother's? Probably not. But it wasn't exactly *ideal*.

"Leo," I didn't wait for his gruff "hullo," before I barreled right into the problem at hand, "Heidi told me to use mom and dad's house while my condo gets fixed, but I'm here and we've run into a bit of an issue."

I heard him inhale, which usually meant he would try to tell me exactly how to fix whatever issue he thinks I ran into. Unfortunately, frozen locks, or walking me through setting up the generator *that I bought and installed* were not the reasons I called for help.

"One of you rented out the house." I continued pushing through whatever he intended to say. "The two of you got your wires crossed or something."

"Yeah, I wondered why you were going to the house. I thought maybe there was a cancellation. Guess you'll either have to come here or get a hotel room."

He was nonchalant about everything. Like every problem had the easiest solution. It wasn't that easy.

“Leo, you know I have no credit cards right now until the situation with my identity gets taken care of. I can’t go *anywhere else*. And you know Heidi doesn’t really want me staying with you. She hasn’t forgiven me yet for accidentally teaching Bella the word *motherfucker*.”

“Oh god, Bella has picked up plenty of words since then. In two languages.” Leo chuckled. “Germans.”

He said it as if that one word explained everything.

“Bringing any of those kids near the Kickers Club during World Cup season probably wasn’t the wisest parenting decision we’ve made. But this is the first year Heidi’s nieces were part of the Rosenball court. So you know how it is.”

His wife was way more German than we’d been growing up. Way more. Leo and I barely scraped by with rudimentary knowledge of German. Heidi, however, not only was fluent, but had a whole slew of brothers and sisters who were all heavily involved at the German culture center.

I had too much nervous energy. It was impossible to sit still. The house wasn’t exactly cold, but you could feel the dampness of the impending storm. While my brother and I tried to figure out what the hell to do, I lit the fire for *Felicity* to enjoy.

“Oh shit. Have you looked outside?” He asked. “I don’t think you’re going anywhere tonight.”

THREE



HONESTLY, I just wanted some peace. To take a nice bath. Have a minute to center my thoughts before I dealt with the impending tidal wave of emotion that accompanied disappointing my sister.

Of course, that couldn't happen. Why would anything in my life be easy when I'd been navigating land mines since Xander and I broke up? Instead, I walk in on some naked, albeit *deliciously sculpted*, silver fox version of Santa Claus hanging out in my bathtub like he owned the place. Okay, he did. But that was beside the point. I didn't need him sorting things out with his family in front of me. He needed to exit my space with an apology.

I'd been about to provide him with that suggestion when Sera called for the nine millionth time. I knew if I let it go to voicemail again, she'd have every police station within a twenty-mile radius of my parent's house on the lookout for me.

"Sera," I greeted her.

"Felicity, what is going on? You should have been here already."

“Why are *you* at Mom and Dad’s?” I asked.

Her new job came with a corporate condo on the lakeshore.

“Oh, we acquired a new DJ for the syndicate. A guy named Kevin *The Wolfman* Taylor from San Francisco. I guess he’s a huge get. Everyone is bonkers over the announcement. Anyway, he needed a place to stay. And I’ve been in that corporate condo for over a year, really it wasn’t fair for me to lay claim to it. So I moved home until Bryce and I figure out what we’re going to do.”

That little fact only further solidified my not being home. That meant she was in our old bedroom, which left the basement pull-out sofa or the air mattress in what used to be Rex’s old bedroom. Mom converted that into a crafting room after we left for college. I made a mental note to text our brother. He’d left earlier than me from New York, as he’d had a business emergency that he needed to tend to before coming home.

“Sera, this just makes more sense. You and Bryce can spend lots of time with Mom and Dad. They can soak in how charming and well-heeled Bryce is. Rex can bond with his soon-to-be brother-in-law, and I can come enjoy all the holiday stuff, then be on my merry way.”

“A—Bryce and I made so many fun plans for everyone. You need to be *here* at home so that you could really get to *know* Bryce. He gave up spending the holiday with his family because he knew how important it was to me, he get to know

you in person. Other than him, you're the most important person in my life. I just don't understand."

I heard the pinch in her voice. And it nearly broke me. I almost hopped from the kitchen stool, collected my bag, and told the guy on his phone that I'd made a mistake and headed home.

"Sera, what don't you understand? I literally just wrote you a novel's length explanation. I can't do this right now. There was some random guy taking a bath in my Airbnb that I need to handle."

"There's a random man in your rental and you're standing there casually carrying on a conversation with me? Are you under duress?" She practically shouted, "Do I need to call the police? Hit the number one if I need to call."

"I'm fine." I told her. "There's no need to call the police. Besides—"

Whatever argument had been forming on my tongue died. I'd chosen that very moment to turn toward the bathtub Santa, who had been futzing with the fireplace. But when he'd thrown open the curtains of the picture window on a swear, I followed where he obviously was looking.

Snow. Not just snow. Like the world's largest pillow fight in front of our picture window. Fat, feather sized balls of snow plummeting from the sky in some kind of race to complete their death spiral to earth, the fastest.

"How is that possible?" I asked, forgetting I still had Sera on the phone. "I just walked in not even thirty minutes ago and

it was clear skies.”

“I don’t think anyone is going anywhere tonight.” Bathtub Santa told whoever was on his phone, but also turning to look at me while he did. As if to confirm that, I saw the literal shitstorm blowing in front of our window.

“Sera... I think I’m stuck. The snow is... wow, it’s really coming down.”

“Oh no! I heard there was snow coming. Want us to come get you? Bryce has an SUV with four-wheel drive.”

If I’d been ten minutes down the block from them? Sure, someone with an SUV could have come and gotten me. But I was easily a half hour away in good weather. There was no way anyone could come and get me and get home safely. I truly was stuck with some random guy I knew nothing about.

“Give me your driver’s license.” I shoved my hand in his direction.

“I own this place.” Bathtub Santa told me again, “Do you really think you’d be in danger from the guy *who rents this place out?*”

He ran a hand through his hair, agitation furrowing his brow and shuttering a very captivating set of ice-blue eyes.

“Sera—I need to deal with this situation. I’ll text you in a minute.” I told her.

“Do I need to call the police?” She asked again.

“No.”

I gave the silver fox a once over. He looked fairly unassuming in his jeans and gray Henley, his salt and pepper hair standing on end from what I assume was a quick towel dry.

“Until I figure this out, I’ll text you our special word every half hour. If you don’t hear from me, at...” I looked at my Apple watch, “eight-thirty, then call the cops.”

FOUR



THE FIRECRACKER in boots had moxie. Fearless. Fierce. I don't know what the word was, but there was something about her bossiness that charmed me.

"My name is Klaus." I told her. "Klaus Baer. My brother Leo and I rent this place out. It used to belong to my mom and dad."

Rather than shake my extended hand, she continued to hold hers out, palm up. She wiggled those ornament decorated nails, obviously waiting for me to give her my driver's license.

"I promise, both Leo and I are totally normal people. Someone stole my identity. Then the pipes in my damn condo burst, and now this. I swear Christmas can suck a dick."

I yanked my wallet out of my back pocket and pressed my license in her hand. She held it up and examined it before snapping a picture and I assumed texted it to whomever *Sera* was.

"Would you like my phone number too?" I asked, "It's eight-four-seven-two-zero-two-six-three-two-zero. You can give that to whoever you're sending my license to."

“With a name like Klaus, are you sure you should tell Christmas to suck your dick?”

It was the first peek of her personality I saw. She appeared to have a beautiful smile that she kept hiding behind that bitten lip. I knew nothing about her, other than she had great taste in shoes. But that lip being scissored between her teeth? It snared my attention like a fish to a lure.

“Klaus like mouse, not clause.” I felt like my voice had taken a vacation and left me with just the hint of a functioning voice box. “And I told Christmas to suck *any* dick, not mine specifically. You know, just so we’re totally on the same page. Accuracy and all that.”

Her cheeks went pink again. It was the first time I noticed the unusual bramble color of her eyes peeking beneath the longest set of eyelashes I’d ever seen. They broadcast plenty of thoughts on the situation, but as her eyes wrinkled with delight, then schooled into something akin to skepticism, the one emotion I didn’t see skitter across her face was fear. That was a holiday miracle. If I wasn’t personally in the middle of this awkward as fuck situation, I don’t know if my advice for anyone else would be anything but “sleep in your car, and stay the fuck away.”

The snow came down like it had some kind of quota to fill. Piles already formed against the front door. The responsible side of my brain told me I should start to salt and snow blow. Curiosity, though, had me staying put. Earning even a shaky trust with my new roommate was now priority number one.

“Well mouse not clause, what are we going to do about this?” she motioned between the two of us. “I promise you, sleeping in a house with some rando who could chop me up and use my skin as a blanket doesn’t sit well with me. But I’m also not an asshole. I realize sending you out in that—” she pointed at a near white out snowstorm outside our windows, “would be worse than grinchy.”

“Since your suitcase is already in there—take the master.” I told her, relief flooding my nervous system. “Both doors, the one to the bathroom and leading to the hallway, have locks on them. Please use them for your own peace of mind. You won’t insult me. The two bedrooms share a bathroom, hence the locks. I’ll take the second room. I’m assuming you came straight from the airport. I have some food but it’s nothing fancy. Frozen pizza and Hungry Man dinners.”

I watched her take a tour of the space. First through the living room, inspecting all the knickknacks on the shelves, then down the hallway to look at the second bedroom. There wasn’t much in there, just a queen bed, dresser, and chair. The house used to be much homier. We’d quickly learned people would steal anything, not glued or nailed down.

Her heels clicked against the wood floors, mapping her progress through the house. They retreated from the second bedroom and back, I assumed, into the master once again. While she continued, I set the oven to heat and pulled one of my two pizzas out of the freezer.

“My bag is in the closet.” I called to her. “Once you’re done in the bedroom, I’ll grab it. That way, you don’t have to

worry about my stuff being in your space.”

“It’s a cute house.”

She’d shucked off her pointy heeled boots in favor of some oversized socks with birds on them. Socks was an understatement for the offense to the eyes that she wore. They were a teal base with every variation of colored flower splashed across them and somewhere in that tornado of color were some birds.

“Those socks,” I pointed toward her feet with a smile, “interesting choice.”

“They’re puffins!” She giggled, balancing on one foot, and kicking forward the one I’d pointed toward, wiggling her toes. “My sister and I have a strange obsession with them. She went on a cruise around the world last year and bought these for me in Baja, California. Incidentally, it is *not* in the United States in case you didn’t know that. It’s part of Mexico.”

The delight that spread across her face felt like another small crack in that buttoned up persona.

“You have a really nice smile.” I told her.

Rather than wait to see her reaction to my compliment, I dug around in the fridge for a couple of pops. When I turned back, she’d taken a seat at the kitchen counter once again. Her chin rested in her palm, watching me dance around. She looked peaceful while she sat there.

“I’ve only got Coke.” I apologized, placing a glass in front of her. “Unless you prefer beer?”

“Coke is fine.” She popped the top and took a sip straight from a can. “Damn, it’s been forever since I’ve had a regular pop.”

If I had the chance to later, I’d circle back to that. I wondered if it was a dietary choice. My philosophy leaned toward “we’re all gonna die one day anyway, may as well enjoy the ride,” but I also didn’t get stigmatized by beauty magazines every single day for my ribs not showing in bathing suits.

“So your sister took a trip around the world? Was that like for work?”

“Oh gosh,” she played with the pop can top, flicking it with thumbnail as she talked, “that is one really long story.”

“We’re snowed in with literally nowhere we can go. Time is the one commodity we have in abundance and I’d love to hear it.”

“Sera, my sister, lives in Boston.” She giggled, obliging my request. “I’m in New York. My older brother is in New York too, but that doesn’t matter as it pertains to her trip around the world. She was a banker—though she majored in performance opera in college—and had just lost her job. Her life last year had been kind of in the shitter. Prior to the cruise, she’d been debating moving to New York. Her plan was to come and live with my then boyfriend Xander which is also another really long story that completely has no bearing on this one. I’m at work one morning and Kennedy—one of my hosts—is talking about this guy from Boston who is taking a trip around the world. He needs a Sarah Miller to go with him

because he'd intended to take his then girlfriend on this amazing once in a lifetime trip, but found out she was cheating on him."

"One of your hosts?" I asked, "Do you work in food service?"

She crinkled her nose at me as if I'd just suggested she smelled like rotten cheese.

"Food service? Why would you think I work in—oh... hosts? No." She laughed, while she twisted the hair that hung over her shoulder up off her face into a loose bun. "I work for the number one celebrity gossip show on cable. I'm an associate executive producer."

The more she talked, the more relaxed she became. When she'd first come out of her bedroom, she'd carried herself ramrod straight, with this snooty air about her that said not to fuck with her. Now her back rounded into a comfortable slouch, animatedly gesturing while she spoke, her eyes expressing the gamut of emotions from surprise to delight. She'd worn a belt over that soft-looking sweater, and that was off and cast aside on the stool next to her.

"Anyway, my sister's name is Sera Miller. Her legal name is Seraphim, but easy to fix! That's a call to customer service. Blame it on confusion and assumption. Done."

Seraphim and Felicity, what beautiful names. I wondered offhand what her sister looked like. If she was as pretty as Felicity was.

“I told her she definitely needed to email him. It was like a sign from the universe. There was nothing holding her to Boston. She had no job prospects, so *Carpe diem!* It was the trip of a lifetime. She emailed Bryce, they met for coffee, and off they went.

“Incidentally his brother is married to one half of the hottest morning show in the country, and they’d mentioned Bryce’s entreaty on their radio show and it got so much buzz that they asked my sister to provide updates about their trip while they sailed around the world. It was a tremendous hit. She called the blog *Date and Switch*. The blog and social media pages became crazy popular while she was traveling. So much so that when they finished their trip, the company that hosts *The Bear and Raven Morning Show* hired her to be their director of social media for all of its shows, not just Bear and Raven. So she moved here, back home by my parents and is crazy successful doing her thing in radio.”

The oven beeped, startling us both. Felicity tried to hide her giggle behind a sip of Coke. She told a great story—I was a hundred percent invested in hearing how it panned out.

“Speaking of your sister, it’s eight thirty. Don’t forget to text her your secret code word, so she knows you’re still alive and I haven’t yet prepared you for sacrifice.”

“Well, not yet anyway.” She volleyed. “I think your oven needs to be hotter than three twenty-five to properly cook a human sacrifice.”

FIVE



MAYBE THE SITUATION wasn't entirely awful. Sure, Sera was beside herself that I wasn't staying at the house, but now knowing she was a permanent resident at my mom and dad's for the foreseeable future, I felt like being here, at some distance, really was the best. Sera living there, that meant that Bryce for sure ingratiated himself into my parent's lives. Meeting me and Rex in person really was the last step. It meant that the two lovebirds were probably beyond comfortable being a couple together in front of my parents. Which knowing Sera meant never ending loving looks and public displays of affection. Those would be hard for me to watch. I wish I hadn't made her so fucking disappointed.

I shot off a text to Sera, letting her know that Twin A was safe and sound. We didn't really have a secret code. The only special identifier we had was that we'd been calling ourselves A and B for most of our lives. It was enough, though. No stranger would know that. Unless I guess they used my face to unlock my phone and scrolled through our messages.

"It's no Lou's, but it's still Chicago-ish... Home Run Inn." Klaus shrugged with a smile, placing two slices in front of me.

“Hopefully you’re not a vegetarian, otherwise I don’t have much else to offer you.”

“Not a vegetarian.” I pulled at a slice of pepperoni covered in cheese. “Funny enough, I’m fairly agnostic in the Chicago pizza battles. And really, even the whole Chicago versus New York. Meh. Pizza is pizza. I see merits in both.”

“Do you at least swear an allegiance to Lou’s or Giordano’s?”

He asked, grabbing a knife and fork for me out of the drawer.

“I am the Switzerland of all allegiances,” I laughed. “Cubs versus Sox, Giordano’s versus Lou’s versus Uno’s versus Gino’s, Nuts on Clark versus Garrett’s Popcorn, I am a hundred percent loyalty free. I have very few controversial opinions. Except, the original *Parent Trap* with Hayley Mills is a million times better than the Lindsay Lohan version, *Gilmore Girls A Year in a Life* was a sham and if I ever meet Amy Sherman-Palladino she and I will have *words*. And while I love Lady Gaga,” I continued, “I really do. She went to Tisch, just like me! Except I went for television and film, and she went for music—obviously. Besides the point.”

I felt like my mouth was running a million miles a minute. My mom always said it was what I did when I was nervous. Filled the silence with chipmunk chatter, as she called it. Not that one could help how their sentences sped up when uncomfortable.

“Despite how amazing Lady Gaga is,” I told him, “Madonna will *always* be the queen.”

He looked at me like I had grown a second head.

Eloise: Background check came back clear.

Eloise: Check your email

I could always count on my assistant, Eloise, to be on top of things. Even at nine thirty New York time. That background check had come back fast, too. Especially considering I'd sent it after hours, and the night before the start of the holiday weekend.

“Wow, you weren't kidding about the identity theft thing. I can't even imagine what kind of stress accompanies this mess.”

“I'm sorry?”

The bite in his voice stopped my scroll and pulled my focus back to him.

“What do you mean, I wasn't kidding about the identity theft thing? What are you talking about?”

“On your background check.” I held up my phone, showing him his report. “It's...wow”

“You had me background checked? What kind of person —?”

He pushed himself from the counter where he'd been casually leaning across from where I sat. He paced in a circle

around the kitchen, looking up toward the light, mumbling to himself.

“You couldn’t just take my word that I was a good guy?” He asked. “The fact I gave you my *driver’s license and my phone number* weren’t enough of a show of trust?”

“Ted Bundy convinced women he was the nice, affable guy on campus too—and look at what happened to all of them.” I told him, closing out the report and placing my phone on the counter. “A woman, snowbound in a house with a total stranger, can’t be too careful. It’s routine. I run them on everyone. I even ran one on Bryce before giving Sera the okay to take that cruise with him.”

The congenial atmosphere we’d just existed in popped. Klaus stomped out of the room and into what was “my” bedroom. I heard the closet door slide open, and then close again before he clomped across the hall into the second bedroom. The door shut, and he left me to my own devices. Honestly, it hadn’t occurred to me Klaus would take offense to a background check.

Group Text from Rex: Tell mom and dad that I’m dealing with issues pertaining to work. I’m going to remain downtown at the Hotel Excelsior until my business is complete.

Me: Tell them yourself.

Me: You just don't want to deal with mom being all in her feelings that you stayed at a hotel instead of at home.

Sera: You're one to talk. Are you gonna be the pot or the kettle Ms. I'm snowed in an Airbnb with a random stranger because I'd rather spend my holiday with him than spend my birthday with my twin sister after promising we'd do exactly that after a year apart?

I swear the second the text message appeared on my phone; Rex's face was lighting up my screen.

"Felicity, why are you staying in an Airbnb? And what is this about a random stranger?"

Having spent the last year living with Mr. Stern and Grumpy, his brusque nature rarely affected me. But between Sera's dress down earlier, and now Klaus being upset about the background check, tears were inevitable.

"I just couldn't do it." I tried to keep my voice normal and contain the emotion that tightened my chest. "Sera is so fucking happy. And you know Bryce is probably going to

propose. I'm sure he's going to be super cliché and give her a ring as a Christmas present. And even if it is dumb and cliché, I'm so damn happy for her. But I'm so sad, Rex. I'm sad for me."

"I know Pudge."

It wasn't often anyone saw soft Rex. There was a distinct possibility I was the only one who got that side of him. Maybe Sera, to an extent. But I don't think it was the same. Not entirely. He carried me through the flaming tar pit of my heartbreak for the seven months. He'd wiped every tear, witnessed first-hand, every rage filled rant about Xander and what he did to me. Stood sentry at my apartment when I went to pack up my stuff, and came and got me at work when Xander tried to confront me there. Sure, Sera and I were twins. We would always share a special bond. There was something about Rex seeing me at my absolute worst, though, that had really changed the trajectory of our relationship.

He was probably also the only person on the planet that could get away with calling me *pudge*. Especially since the nickname probably hit just a little *too* close to bullseye for personal comfort. But he'd been calling me pudge and Sera pidge, for I couldn't even remember how long. At least since grade school. I'm not even sure how the nicknames started.

"And you know how mom is. She was all 'Felicity it's been seven months, time to stop moping and move on.' So you know I will not get any kind of understanding from her. I don't know why I still feel so upside down. But it hurts, Rex. And seeing Sera and Bryce will make it hurt worse. She's so damn

excited for everyone to meet him. I don't want *my* hurt to ruin *her* special plans. I figured giving myself a little distance would be good for everyone. And now I'm stuck in a blizzard at an Airbnb with a guy named Klaus who owns this house with his brother. And he's mad that I ran a background check on him."

I heard the snowblower start up just outside my window and watched as Klaus dug into the enormous pile already accumulating on the driveway and walkway.

"Back up. Why is Klaus in the house?"

"That rhymed." I chuckled.

"Felicity—focus. I don't understand why the owner of the Airbnb is with you in the house? And if he's upset about having a background check run on him, clearly, he isn't on the up and up. Any sensible businessman would know that background checks are standard practice. One can't be too careful."

At least he understood.

"Start from the beginning. When did you book an Airbnb?"

"Tuesday. After you left, I had too much time to think. And knowing you would sleep on the pullout in the basement meant I had the air mattress in mom's craft room. I didn't want to suffocate on Bryce and Sera's happiness all week. I looked into hotels by mom and dad's house, and they're all booked—huge surprise. The cost of the hotels downtown is ridiculous. You're lucky you can call your hotel charges *business*

expenses because six hundred dollars a night is not in my price range. When I searched for Airbnbs, this was the only one that came up as available, so I grabbed it before I lost it.”

“Okay, so you landed today and took an Uber, I’m assuming?”

“Yeah, and the snow is really bad up here. I arrived, came into the house and there’s some random man taking a bath. And I’m all ‘excuse me, this is my rental.’ And he was like ‘sorry, I own this place and my sister-in-law told me there were no reservations this week. The pipes burst in my condo, and I have nowhere else to go.’

“Then, as I was talking to Sera—who literally piled so much guilt on me, my back’s about to break—I looked out the window and I couldn’t even see the street. There was so much snow already. Now I’m stuck, staying here overnight with someone I don’t even know. And you know me. I work in television! I’ve seen every true crime story known to man. Risking my personhood being in a house with some rando? So, I asked him for a copy of his driver’s license, which I texted to Sera and Eloise, and Eloise ran me a background check.”

“Let me guess, you skipped the disclosure and consent part when you abused your company’s resources. That’s why he’s mad, right?”

There was no point in answering. He already knew. With a heavy sigh, I looked toward the front yard a second time. Despite the snow still falling like ashes in a building fire, Klaus remained outside, shoveling snow off the walkway like it owed him something.

“While I wholeheartedly agree with you taking your personal safety measures in hand, you really should have been upfront with him, pudge. I would feel pretty blindsided too if I didn’t expect someone to be digging around in my background.”

“Someone stole his identity. That’s why when his pipes broke in his condo, he had to come here. Then it started snowing. And now we’re stuck.”

“Would you like me to come and get you?” He asked.

“Rex, have you looked outside? It would take you until tomorrow morning to even make it up here. That’s assuming the roads aren’t a shit show. Besides, what car do you even have to come and get me?”

“Tomorrow, once the snow clears?” He asked. “Maybe staying at the hotel with me would be more palatable for Sera? I can pay for a room for you if there are any available.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

I craned my neck to see if I could spot Klaus outside. The snowblower had stopped, but I also no longer heard the telltale scrape of a shovel against the sidewalk. I worried he’d overdone himself. Shoveling heavy, wet snow was the leading cause of heart attacks in the winter. Of course, the man looked like he could bench press a high schooler, so he probably wasn’t out of shape and therefore it wasn’t much of a strain to toss all of that snow aside. But still.

“As far as Sera goes, she really missed you last year. Being physically distanced from you solidified the significance you

have in her life. Yes, you're twins. But she also looks to you as her older sister. I know you're hurting. What Xander did was a tremendous shock. Your entire world went sideways. But Sera just wants to share *her* happiness with her favorite person."

I heard a voice. I know I was not imagining it. The voice—a woman's voice—specifically called his name.

"I'm needed in a meeting." Rex grunted, not giving me even a second to say thank you, "text me as soon as you wake up. If I don't hear from you by eight o'clock, I'm calling the Gurnee Police Department."

He disconnected before I could agree, or tell him he was being ridiculous, or just tell him how much I appreciated him.

Me: B—I'm really sorry if I ruined your plans.

Me: Xander broke my heart, Sera, and I still am really sad about that

Me: We'll still celebrate our birthdays together, even if I have to slap some snowshoes on my feet and ski to you.

I stared at my phone, waiting for a response that didn't come.

SIX



SHE'D SURPRISED the hell out of me. Who has access to those kinds of resources? She snapped her finger and within she had a background check on me? A few rounds with the snowblower and shovel provided some clarity. And after the workout, my tired body forgot the aggravation of having someone rudely push their nose into my business.

As I'd been getting my boots on and adding a long-sleeved shirt beneath my hoodie, I heard her crying. Not just crying, a full sobbing cry. Like that didn't twist me up inside. All the anger I'd felt at her giant overstep into my personal business disintegrated. Tears were my kryptonite.

By the time I finished with the driveway came back inside, the lights under her door were dark. While not late by Chicago standards, the day of travel and being used to east coast time, I assumed, did her in. It was probably for the better, anyway. Perhaps going to bed would allow a "reset" on the strange evening.

The snow still fell like it was being paid to do so. Plow trucks had yet to patrol. Hopefully, over the course of the night, they'd work their way into the neighborhoods and get us

dug out. I'd have words for my sister-in-law and brother in the morning about keeping better records. But, even with Felicity's minor blow up, talking to her had been nice. Different.

She was definitely *very* New York. Or how I imagined New Yorkers to be based on what I saw on television. I'd never actually *been* to New York.

I imagined she had a super sleek condo in a skyscraper somewhere with a doorman named Jeeves, that she passed shopping bags off to as she got out of her Town car. She probably "brunched" on weekends with her friends and spent hours at the salon getting her hair done just so.

From the high-end suitcase parked in the bedroom to those delicious spiky boots that made me hard. Everything about her screamed hip and urbane. Definitely not the person who worked a hotline like me. She was probably the type to restrict her life to street boundaries. I could practically hear her telling her friends, "I don't go anywhere past 11th Street."

Everything about her seemed curated. As if she had someone she called up and told what she needed an outfit for, and they messengered it over to her to hang in her closet the size of a master bedroom. She'd probably never step foot in an Old Navy.

I tried to get ready for bed as quietly as possible, given we shared a bathroom. The door to her bedroom was closed. I certainly didn't want to freak her out by testing the lock, but my curiosity burned. Given how she'd dressed me down with

the whole Ted Bundy/Serial Killer thing, I assumed she'd be a good girl and lock herself in.

Even though the background check was invasive as all shit, I wondered how she knew to do it. She had to be fairly wealthy to just snap her fingers and have one done. The longer I spent thinking about her, the deeper my curiosity grew.

After closing my door to the connected bathroom and getting into bed, my mind got lost in thoughts of my spitfire of a temporary roommate. As I closed my eyes, hoping sleep would grab me, I sent an entreaty to the universe that the plow trucks would take their sweet time digging us out. I really wanted a reset so I could get to know her a bit more. Just as I drifted into sleep, I realized she never actually introduced herself to me.



It was going to be a better day. Thankfully, when I'd gone grocery shopping, I'd bought enough things to get me through the holidays. Even if most of it were my tastes without accounting for guests. I had the basics, though. Coffee, eggs, biscuits, bacon, the usual breakfast fare. Though Ms. Spiky Boots and expensive suitcases more than likely did things like Matcha Lattes and chia oatmeal.

I heard her in the bathroom and turned away from the door to concentrate on getting the eggs scrambled. It was torture waiting for her approach. I ran over a million stupid sounding opening phrases to say to her when she finally sat at the kitchen table.

“It’s like a winter wonderland out there!” The excitement in her voice yanked a smile right out of me. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen this much snow just existing where it fell.”

I poured her a cup of coffee and placed it in front of where she sat, at the counter instead of the table. It gave her a bird’s-eye view of me cooking at the stove. I tried not to get too excited about. But I felt her assessing gaze on me. She probably wanted to make sure I didn’t roofie her eggs or something. The soft sensation of her attention had me desperately trying not to lose concentration and ruin breakfast.

“I don’t have any fancy coffees or anything, but I do have some flavored creamer. I’m a sucker for Elf.” I laughed, pointing at the container. “The grocery store had holiday movie themed creamers. Usually I drink my coffee black, but it being Christmas Eve tomorrow, I figured I’d do something special. It’s supposed to taste like sugar cookies.”

She tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, smiling her thanks as she took it from me. Today she had her hair all soft and wavy. She let it fall wherever it wanted to. I had to force my hands into my pockets, so I didn’t do something dumb, like trying to see if it was as silky as it looked.

“Breakfast should be ready in a few minutes.” I told her to fill the silence, “It’s nothing fancy. Just some eggs and bacon, oh and biscuits should come out of the oven in about four minutes.”

“No need to call the police, Rex,” her voice tinkled with chagrin as she picked up her phone, “I’m still alive, have all of

my appendages, and am not hog-tied in a creepy, damp, basement... what? Oh, no! You're kidding."

I tried not to eavesdrop. My goal remained. Today would start better than yesterday ended. But she went from delighted to worried in a nanosecond.

"Well, maybe by tonight. I guess I'll just keep you posted. Thanks Rex. Love you too."

Rather than update me on whatever it was *Rex* had said, she launched right into typing a novel on her phone, her lip pinched between her teeth.

"One breakfast for the unnamed beauty furiously texting *War and Peace*." I placed the plate in front of her.

That got her attention. While she didn't put her phone down, at least she cocked her head in my direction. She held her phone suspended midway between the counter and up where it had been while she looked at it.

"My brother, Rex, called to check on me."

It was when she set her phone down on the counter that I caught a full glimpse of her holiday themed manicure. Tiny multicolored ornaments suspended by white ribbons against a red sparkly nail polish. They were totally precious.

"I guess it's still snowing in places." She craned her neck to see out the back window—it was hard to tell if it was actual snow falling or the wind kicking up the snowdrifts. "Anyway, I guess the news is telling everyone to shelter in place because the plows are having a dickens of a time getting everything cleared."

“We have eighteen inches of snow on the ground already.” I told her. “It will be a while before they’re able to dig us out.”

It took me over an hour getting the snow off the driveway and sidewalks before going to bed, and now it looked as if I hadn’t done a thing.

“Since it appears we’ll be here at least for most of the day today, how about a fresh start?” I suggested, extending my hand. “I’m Klaus Baer. I presently live about twenty minutes from here up in Antioch. My brother Leo and I grew up in the city, near Andersonville.”

She set her fork back down, wiped her lips, and straightened in her seat before extending her hand. “Felicity Miller, originally from Lincolnshire, presently living in Manhattan.”

After a beat, she added, “and I’m really sorry for springing the background check on you. I work in media so they’re standard practice. Sometimes I forget that not everyone gets fully vetted for practically existing. I shouldn’t have overstepped and I’m sorry. I was a bit freaked out.”

“It’s a new day.” I told her, making a plate and taking a seat next to her.

Being knee to knee with her made me suddenly hyperaware of everything. How crunchy the crust on the biscuits I made were. The crackle of the bacon when I took a bite, and the tinny scraping sound of our forks against the plates. It was too damn quiet. We needed something to fill the silence.

“You mentioned yesterday working in T.V. Would I see you if I were flipping through the channels?”

It was when she threw her head back on a laugh that I noticed the difference in her appearance this morning. Last night, she'd been so stylish and put together. All made up looking very stylish. This morning she'd appeared in an oversized NYU Hoodie and a pair of candy cane striped leggings. She had on no makeup, which made her look soft and innocent. Sitting next to the window reflecting the sun off the snow-covered backyard gave her a golden halo against her burnished sunset hair, like she truly was a Christmas angel descending to deliver me some kind of special holiday wish.

“Oh god no. They don't want my kind in front of a television. Lest we give society any kind of normalcy in their exposure to the female body. No—I work behind the scenes as an executive producer. I make sure that the show has talent booked, that everyone has what they need for the episode, source content sometimes. Essentially, I'm a jack of all trades. But definitely never on-the-air or in front of a camera.”

While she was definitely not a stick figure, she rocked the hell out of the curves she had. How sad that she existed in an environment that sought to remind people daily that they were less than. I couldn't imagine having any tolerance for the never-ending judgement. Clearly her *hot topic* cable channel had never heard the wise words of one Sir Mix-A-Lot.

I grabbed the coffeepot to give us both a warmup. When I turned back, I noticed her smile faded. While she wasn't

frowning, per se, I could tell the laughter and bravado was a front for whatever emotion played out in front of me.

“That’s crap.”

I couldn’t help myself.

“You are lovely, Felicity. Image obsession isn’t new, but it’s probably compounded because of where you work.”

“I’m a realist, Klaus. Television is an industry where I’m doused in desirable standards every single day. I appreciate the kind words, but honestly, I’m a realist. I accept what I am and that I don’t measure up to those standards. There’s no point fighting it. My metaphorical headphones remind me I’m pretty badass without being a size six.”

I didn’t want to press the issue, especially when we seemed to inch toward genial acquaintance. But I hated she had to take a realist approach to anything. Beneath the bravado, I hoped she truly thought she was a badass. Given we’d just met, I knew little about her, but she seemed pretty cool.

“What was it you said you did?” she asked, grabbing her coffee mug and following me into the living room. With breakfast finished and a whole day spread out in front of us snowed in with each other, I suggested we watch a holiday movie or two.

She curled up in the reclining chair by the window overlooking the front yard. It was a mass of white powder clear up to the end of the street. There wasn’t any delineation between where people’s driveways ended and the street began.

I assumed she wanted to sit there so she could see the exact moment when the plow trucks came through. It was going to be a while. I hoped in that time we could at least be amicable, if not maybe even friendly.

It was subtle. Barely discernable, but I heard it. The cutest little sigh when she took a sip of that coffee with sugar cookie flavored cream. Such a stupid thing to high five myself over. I don't know what possessed me to put the creamer in my cart. I'd had an argument with myself over how consumerized I'd become that I'd fall prey to such a silly holiday gimmick. But gimmick or not, I'm glad she found a moment of enjoyment in some silly impulse buy.

"I hadn't." Grateful to have a cup of coffee to keep my hands busy, I took a sip before continuing. "I'm a case evaluator for the 3-3-3 line. Which basically means that if people call seeking any kind of help—their house burned down, or they are worried about an elderly parent, or don't have money for a child's basic need they can call the helpline without fear and receive services."

"I don't think I've ever met anyone who does that. Is it hard? You know, having to hear so many sad stories every day?"

"It's definitely no cakewalk." I admitted. "Listening to people's stories on the worst day of their lives definitely shifts your outlook on what is important in life. I like the idea of being this small shelter in the storm of life. That for thirty minutes or an hour they can sit with me, and I can take their

hand and show them a path out of the forest. Not actual handholding, of course.” I told her.

She’d been about to ask me something. Every time she asked a question, she’d cock her head just slightly to her left side. A phone call, however, interrupted whatever question she’d been about to ask. Given the huff that accompanied looking at her screen and accepting the call, I could tell it wasn’t a conversation she wanted to have.

“Hey B.”

While she spoke with “B,” she twisted a strand of her hair between her fingers, tying it into a loop and then untying it over and again.

“No, you don’t understand Sera,” she pushed off the chair and began pacing back and forth in front of the bay window. “You are refusing to look at this from any point of view but your own.”

It felt weird sitting there listening in. I didn’t know her situation or why she’d chosen to rent out an Airbnb for the holidays. Until she invited me into her confidences, I wouldn’t intrude. Rather than gawp at her while she huffed and paced, I took my exit. There was plenty of snow that needed shoveling.

SEVEN



I LOVED MY SISTER. Truly, she was the best friend I ever had. But Jesus, sometimes I wanted to throttle her. How someone who shared my DNA could be so different from me was beyond my comprehension.

“Sera, you are missing the point.” I cut off her long-winded diatribe about how I should be at home and that now both me and Rex weren’t staying at my parent’s house and imagine how our parents felt.

I guaranteed they didn’t care where I slept. As long as I showed up at five o’clock sharp for the Miller Twins birthday extravaganza on Christmas Eve, and stayed through Midnight Mass. Christmas Day began at one p.m. for snacks and games before dinner and presents.

They were the most laid-back and predictable people I knew. We always had the freedom to fly home or stay in our respective states without guilt or fear of disappointing them. I was certain that as long as I stuck with their time schedule, where I slept made little difference to them.

“No, Felicity, *you* are missing the point. Bryce knows how important it was he meet you and Rex and you two have

practically given him the finger. You and Rex's actions loudly proclaimed that he isn't important enough to this family for anyone to want to spend quality time with him."

Jesus Christ. I muttered under my breath, immediately feeling guilty for taking the birthday boy's name in vain for such a petty reason as my annoying sister.

"Bryce has plans for us, Felicity. He wants our day to be *special*. And he really wants to bond with the two of you. I'm super close with Penn and Raven, and I know he's hoping for the same with you and Rex."

"Sera, I'm not cancelling on you. I just wanted to have a space of my own to come to. Did I know there was going to be a gigantic blizzard blowing into town? No. Honestly, it's been years since we were joined at the hip twenty-four seven. You'll be with Bryce. There isn't a need for me to be the third wheel after birthday celebrations complete. Same with Christmas. Once the snow clears and we can make plans, you'll see. This really is the best option."

While Sera continued to belabor the point, I watched Klaus clear away the piles of snow from the driveway with the snowblower. I never thought I'd dig a lumberjack vibe, but the way he shoved that snowblower while in his quilted plaid overcoat and wool beanie—it did things for me.

He'd called me pretty. Okay, technically, he called me *lovely*. The way he'd said it though, the word felt higher than such a plebeian adjective like pretty. Sitting knee to knee at breakfast had felt oddly comforting considering he was someone I literally just had a background check performed on.

Klaus had a nice vibe, though. Quiet. Comforting. Like he came to the proverbial table, albeit we sat at a literal one, exactly how he was and there was no bullshit to pick through.

“Are you even listening to me? You haven’t said a word in like five minutes!” Sera yanked me out of my haze.

“Sorry. I got distracted by how much snow is outside. You can’t even see the streets. I’ve forgotten what an experience this is.”

Of course, in Manhattan you don’t see a lot of men in flannel jackets and sweatpants pushing snowblowers down driveways either.

“I just want this year to be special A. For the last month, I’ve had this feeling like it’s going to be totally magical. I know that’s because you and Rex are here. Dating Bryce, and now my twin is here; it makes everything feel like the world is aligning.”

“That’s my point Sera. I don’t begrudge you a single second of happiness. But your world and life feel magical, where mine feels like the glue just finished drying on the remaining fragments of mine. I don’t know if they’re going to hold together or fall apart again.”

“I promise, Felicity, it feels like the entire week is going to be magical *for both of us*, not just me. And not because of Bryce. There is an inexplicable sensation I have, like you being here with me is the perfect alignment for what the world wants to gift to you.”

She sounded like she'd been imbibing on the newly legal gummy bears they sold at specialty shops. Listening universes, perfect alignments, delivering magic. What a bunch of hooley.

“If that is the case, then can the universe please deliver me for Christmas a financially stable, normal man who will not cheat on me? I'd like someone who isn't married to his job, that cares more about being a good person than a wealthy one, and who also doesn't mind if a woman isn't a barbie doll. And if we're shooting for the moon, someone who is really great at oral, digs being in charge in bed, and actually cares whether you're enjoying the ride as much as they are.”

I bit my lip to hold in my giggle. While we certainly weren't prudes, she and I rarely talked specifics about sex. But this whole universe is waiting thing was bordering on silly.

“Oh! And if we're really reaching super far, he actually *likes* to read and can hold intellectual conversations.”

“Are you sure this Santa Claus kind of man exists?”

At least Sera had moved from apoplectic to giggling with me. I was about to tease her about Bryce when Klaus yanked open the front door. Snowflakes covered him to the hips, tapering to thickly packed snow toward his feet.

“It's not snowdrifts.” He said, stomping his feet to shake off the snowflakes. “It's actually *still* snowing. Barely. The storm is winding down. But we'll probably get another inch out of it, at least.”

“Sera, I'll text as soon as the roads open, okay? I promise we'll still have plenty of time together.”

With my sister off the phone, my sole focus became the man standing in the doorway. His red checked jacket and gray sweatpants fit *really well*. The damp material only highlighted how defined his thighs were underneath those pants.

“You’re all wet.” Ms. Master of the Obvious told him.
“Here, let me get the fire going to help take the chill off.”

I shut down the question forming on my lips. I didn’t need to know if he had more sweatpants or any other dry clothes. Nor did I need to suggest he change into something else. Based on his salt and pepper hair, he clearly had been on this planet long enough to take care of his needs and, as a fully functioning adult, knew when to change into a dry pair of pants. He didn’t need me pointing out those kinds of things.

“I was about to put on another pot of coffee. A fresh pot will take that chill right out of your bones.”

Klaus was out of my line of sight as I futzed with the gas fireplace, trying to figure out how to get it started. In the time it took me to find the starter, he’d removed his snowy shoes and jacket, and like a stealth ninja made it by my side without even realizing he was approaching.

“Press and hold for three seconds.”

Whether it was the chill of his hands or that he was the first male contact I’d felt in months, when he pressed his finger against mine, the world tilted. It couldn’t have been more than a single second. Before the fire was even lit, he’d stepped back out of my personal space, but I felt him. Like he’d left a shadow of himself to linger. It wrapped around me in the nanoseconds of time between the realization he was

there and the feeling of his finger on mine. It crackled with awareness. Surrounded me like the gathering atoms of static electricity.

“Thank you.”

I think I said it out loud. Though, I couldn't exactly guarantee that. His sudden presence scrambled my brain. I looked over at him, noticing that he rubbed his fingers together. Maybe it had been static electricity and my lonely brain tried to convince myself it was something other than dry air.

“Movies?” I suggested. “I'm sure there are tons of them on, given tomorrow is Christmas Eve.”

Anything, so I didn't have to keep making a fool of myself. It was Sera's fault. Her mumbo jumbo about magic and the universe had me imagining things that weren't there.

EIGHT



MAYBE THERE WAS some kind of weird holiday kismet where things you asked for somehow got delivered. According to the news, the plow trucks were having a rough go of getting all the roads cleared. The most optimistic predictions suggested the plows wouldn't reach the side roads until very late in the evening.

I would capitalize on that good fortune. Felicity and I were “stuck” together for at least the next sixteen hours. Hopefully, over the course of the day, she'd get to know me. Maybe even look past the point that I had no credit to my name, and a questionable identity thanks to some jerk robbing me of it.

Felicity had been laughing and smiling when I came in. Not that she wasn't cute regularly, but her smile? Brilliant. Her laugh? God, I wanted to hear more of it.

“Hot cocoa and cookies.”

I brought the tray to the living room. Felicity sat on one end of the sofa, wrapped in a fleece blanket. She'd placed one for me as well at the opposite end. Given I'd just been out in the snow, the gesture felt significant.

I felt her eyes take a long journey down my shirt to the flannel pajama bottoms I'd had to change into. I didn't bring much by the way of a wardrobe, planning to spend most of my week bumming around the house doing next to nothing. Other than the wet and frozen pair of sweats that presently tumbled in the dryer, I had only one other option. My actual pajama pants.

She wasn't just casually glancing. No, she was appreciating. I felt those cocoa-hued eyes taking a slow, visual drink of me in my pajama pants. I'd been totally fine with her looking until her lip tucked between her teeth. That had me pinching my thigh to prevent a surprise appearance from my *jolly elf*. As if the movement of my hand tucked in my pocket broke her concentration. She shook her head, cleared her throat, and brushed away an invisible strand of hair in front of her face.

"You have nothing more than frozen pizza and Hungry Man dinners, but you have pre-made cookie dough and hot cocoa packets? This does not compute in my head."

"I planned to spend Christmas here," I shrugged, setting the tray on the ottoman.

Felicity continued to regard me with a question still raising her eyebrow.

"My parents are immigrants. They came over to America *very* early in their lives, like as kids—they are still very European in a lot of ways. One of those is eschewing any of the gimmicky sugar laden treats they marketed to kids like Leo and me every Saturday morning alongside our cartoons. I

didn't eat a sugar cereal until middle school on a school retreat.

“Anyhow, the *one* indulgence my mom allowed was these pre-packaged sugar cookies with the Christmas trees baked inside. Every Christmas we'd help her cut them and place them on a cookie sheet. While the coffee brewed, she'd boil warm milk for us, and we'd have Christmas cookies right from the oven with cocoa as we opened our gifts from Santa. It just kinda stuck.”

I shrugged, feeling my face heat. Was it silly for a forty-five-year-old man to eat tubed sugar cookies? Probably. But especially on this holiday, when my life was gloriously in the shitter, I'd allowed myself every ridiculous and childish indulgence. Flavored cream? Check. Sugar cookies? Check. Those stupid chocolate Santas that you bought for a dollar at the Walgreens? Threw ten dollars' worth of those fuckers in my cart. Same with the candy cane tubes filled with M&M's, and those shitty Little Debbie Christmas cakes that tasted like poor decisions.

“When we were growing up, my mom tried so hard to keep Sera and my birthday totally separate from Christmas—we were born on Christmas Eve,” she explained. “We would get to take turns picking our birthday cake. It was always an ice cream cake, even though it was freezing cold outside. It was an Oreo cookie ice cream pie if it was Sera's year, or a Twix ice cream pie if it was my year. But Rex got all in his feels because he didn't think it was fair. So my mom let him pick our Santa treat.”

She put Santa in air quotes, smiling again as she reminisced.

“Rex always picked cinnamon rolls from Ann Sather’s down in the city. So the Miller household had some kind of ice cream cake before Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve—which now that I think about it, that’s probably why my mom allowed it. It ensured we’d be super awake and alert throughout mass because of the copious amounts of sugar careening through our bloodstream. Then gigantic cinnamon rolls loaded with frosting on Christmas morning.”

Not only did I learn Felicity was a twin but also that her birthday was on Christmas Eve. Knowing that fact had me feeling like the world’s biggest asshole for wishing to have the snowstorm continue to keep us in place. She’d flown home to see them. I shouldn’t be throwing such selfish requests at the universe, even if I had done it with zero expectations of it working. Certainly I’d held no belief that it actually would.

“Can I ask you a kind of personal question?”

She’d just picked up the remote to select a movie, but stopped, turning toward me. There was a little wrinkle that appeared between her eyebrows when she squinted. I thought she was going to tell me no. Rather than wait for permission, I decided to just ask.

“Why would you get an Airbnb if it’s your birthday, your twin sister’s birthday, and Christmas? If you live in New York, I assume you don’t come back very often. Wouldn’t you want to spend as much time with them as you could?”

I wasn't usually so forward with people I didn't know. Asking questions was part of my job. Usually, though, I used a slow drain approach, circling and circling until I got the details I needed. The direct route to an answer was not my forte. Maybe I saw it as a bonding opportunity. To laugh over our lack of desire to be in the thick of activities. I'd been prepared for a sassy attitude. What I hadn't expected were tears.

NINE



HE CAUGHT me totally off guard with his question. We were in the same house. He heard my earlier conversation with Sera. I assumed that's what piqued his curiosity.

“It seemed easier.”

I wasn't technically lying. Between all the back and forth with Sera, the long explanation with Rex, I was tired of justifying my feelings. Though really, what the hell did I care? I didn't owe some random guy I was sharing a house with any explanation.

“That's fair.”

He took a long sip of his cocoa, pointing the remote at the TV and calling up his Prime account. Seeing all of his interests on display felt weirdly intimate. Like I was taking a walk around his living room inspecting his bookshelves, or seeing his clothes arranged in his closet. Klaus was a documentary buff! Nearly all the “recently viewed” were human interest documentaries or travel/tourism documentaries. My big reach pipe dream was to one day be a documentarian.

“I keep telling myself this is the year I’m going to actually use my vacation to take a grand trip.” He pointed the remote toward a *Legendary Cities* documentary. “I don’t know how I spent the first forty-five years of my life being totally content with trips within the U.S. and the occasional all-inclusive in, say, Mexico or Jamaica. But I want to *explore* and *learn* about all the fascinating things that happened before we existed.”

Thankfully, he would not pursue the *why aren’t you staying with your sister* track. It felt too *something*. Not information for a stranger I barely knew.

“You’d love talking to my sister and her boyfriend then. Or I’ll send you her blog. Is your AirDrop on?”

“What’s AirDrop?”

He asked, and it was a valiant effort to hide my giggle.

“You have an iPhone, right? It allows me to transfer files to you over the Wi-Fi instead of texting it to you. Look,” I showed him where he appeared on my airdrop screen. “You already have it turned on.”

I sent him the link to the *Date and Switch* landing page.

“They’ve obviously been back for quite some time. But they traveled to a lot of places and my sister took amazing notes. You’ll get an anthropology lesson with nearly every post.”

He opened it and started scrolling right away. Maybe it was the way he enthusiastically dove right in. But something unglued my mouth and opened the spigot to waterfall my “why I don’t want to be around you for Christmas” story.

“While she was on that trip, the one around the world, I’d been living in New York with my boyfriend, Xander. He’s a financier. I thought he was on the partner track. He’d work a lot of late nights taking clients out for dinners and such, and so many early mornings going in before the opening bell. I truly thought I was living the life. You know, a cute, successful boyfriend. Gorgeous apartment in TriBeCa, drool worthy job everyone wants. Like I thought I was so incredibly lucky. One morning, I woke up and Xander wasn’t home. I figured he fell asleep at work, or maybe left really, really early. When I went downstairs to see if his car was in our parking space, I and found him sneaking out of our neighbor’s condo.”

Klaus gasped. Not a grunt or a groan. But gasped as if he too were absorbing the feeling of being completely betrayed.

“It totally shattered me. I went from flying high, thinking I was in love and quickly approaching rings and white dresses to seeing plain as day that not only had Xander found someone else, but they’d been sleeping together for six months.”

I couldn’t speak anymore. Emotion choked me into silence. It was more than just that he’d been sleeping with someone else under my nose for six months.

“Whitney—that’s her name, our neighbor—is a total divergence from me. I’m a redhead, she’s a blonde. I’m not exactly tall, and I’m thick and sort of... well, chubby, pretty much everywhere. She could easily be a Victoria’s Secret model. She was elegant, and well-heeled, and carried a fucking Birkin bag! Those puppies are like thirty thousand dollars! Our apartment complex was nice. But in like a junior

stockbroker salary, nice. It definitely wasn't Birken bag nice. No way did anyone in that building have an extra thirty grand lying around for a *bag!*”

Somewhere in my rant, Klaus had gotten closer. Not immediately next to me, but close enough that his hand clasped mine. There was no way to know how long it had been there, but I liked it. Hopefully, he left it there.

“I moved out after that. Rex—my older brother—came and collected me, and I've been living with him in Battery Park ever since. I'm going to have to move on, eventually. Rex has been more than accommodating, allowing me to be in his space for going on seven months now. My mom is all 'Felicity you have to stop moping around. It's been seven months. Time to move on.' But I don't know if I can just yet. I feel glued back together, but kind of in a way where each one of those broken seams feel weak and easily susceptible to shattering again.”

He nodded along with every word I spoke. Like some unspoken agreement that he, too, felt the same way. That singular gesture shifted a wall inside me I didn't realize had been there. Having someone to listen to me who wasn't emotionally invested felt incredibly freeing.

“My wife and I were college sweethearts.” He said, interrupting my own tangential thoughts. “We both had dreams of changing the world. She wanted to work in public policy—try to influence change from the inside. Eventually run for public office. She worked on so many campaigns here in Chicago, I probably couldn't even list them all. That's not

really even my point. It changed her. She went from this driven, passionate, take no prisoners kind of ball buster to someone conniving. She had zero qualms about winning at any cost. Slander, dirty politics—you name it. She executed it without so much as a blink. Somewhere along the line, she forgot she wanted to change the world. Instead, she dove into the shark tank and happily swam with them.

“Seeing myself through her eyes, as her opinion of me slowly changed—it definitely didn’t feel good, that’s for sure.”

His laugh sounded forced, and when I turned to look at him, those blue eyes that had been so captivating earlier seemed to drown in an ocean of confusion.

“One day, she said we were on different life paths. She had higher aspirations than being married to a clock puncher who was part of the problem and not the solution.”

“That makes no sense.”

Our proximity to one another had inched even closer. Not that I was complaining. I could feel the soft warmth of his flannel pants up against the cotton of my leggings.

“You literally work a help line. How are you part of the problem?”

Klaus shrugged, cradling his hot chocolate as if it was his lifeline.

“I work for the state.” He shrugged. “People have opinions about state workers. I’m used to it. I love what I do, though. It’s hard, all of those people who are at their absolute worst moments of their lives. But I hang up each call knowing that I

made a difference. Even if there are twenty-five hundred still waiting to talk to someone like me.”

“If you could do anything in the world—shoot for the moon kind of dream—what would you do?” I asked.

It was a selfish question to ask. Because my shoot for the moon aspirations were something locked so tight, protected in the antechamber of my soul, that I didn’t know if I could provide my dream in return.

Sure, television was great. I got invited to cool parties and had neat stories to tell about famous people. But it was a grind. And exhausting.

“I would love to run a non-profit. Or even be the executer or someone’s charitable foundation. To get to hear the needs that were in the community and get to be the one writing the checks. I’ll never have change-the-world kind of money. I do what I can with what I have. But, that kind of bank is nowhere in my stratosphere. Imagine, the amount of help communities could receive with a blank checkbook and carte blanche to solve the world’s ills.”

“You’d be a real-life Santa Klaus like mouse.”

I was so tickled by my cute quip I missed his cue. Usually, one would see or even feel a shift on the sofa that would signal a man was approaching to kiss you. Not me. I missed the hell out of that signal. And then boom—his lips were on mine. I did not mind. In fact, I sort of *liked* it. I just finished telling him how shattered I felt because of Xander, and yet my body was saying *how ya doin’* to the first tepid male/female interaction I’d experienced since the breakup.

“Wow. Um. That was...” Klaus ran his hands over the tops of his thighs. His ears and neck looked sunburned, despite it being the dead of winter. “I’m won’t say I didn’t *mean* to do that, because clearly, I’m the one who kissed you. I just don’t remember consciously deciding to lean over and plant one on you.”

He laughed, though the wrinkles around his eyes broadcast how concerned he was that I’d freak out.

“It’s fine.” I traced my lips as if I could relive the kiss by touching them. “Sometimes when two people experience similar situations, it’s sort of a bonding experience. As if one person recognizes the other’s humanity. Sometimes an additional expression of understanding just happens, right? Like a hug, or a high five, or any other random gesture.”

Except it didn’t feel like a random gesture. And I didn’t want it to be. I wanted to kiss him again to see if the first one had just been a fluke. Instead, he simply nodded and pointed the remote at the TV.

“Elf is my favorite,” he told me. “Some perfect holiday cheer after such sad revelations.”

Perfect. I thought. If I could actually focus on the movie and not on how close he sat or how good he smelled. Especially not on how badly I wanted to feel his mouth against mine again.

TEN



I KISSED HER. I searched every crevice of my conscience to see if there was any guilt lingering. Not even a smidgeon. While the kiss had happened purely on instinct, she kissed me back. Now I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I'd been honest when I told her that *Elf* was my favorite holiday movie. I could watch it multiple times through the holidays and still feel entertained each time. With so much heavy shit in the world, being able to smile and laugh was an indulgence I didn't imbibe in enough. Except, I couldn't focus on the movie. The feel of her lips against mine stole my attention away repeatedly. My fingers continued to tingle with a desire to hold her hand, to caress her face, or run my fingers through her hair.

Each time she laughed, she commanded my focus away from the movie and onto her. Experiencing her delight filled the room with lightness. As if it seeped into every pore on my body and swept away all the dingy, gray parts of me that had become consumed with the sadness I witnessed every day.

"Now it's my turn!" She clapped and wiggled in her seat as the credits rolled, extending her hand toward me.

“I’m going to check on my sweatpants. They should be dry by now. Then we can watch whatever your heart desires, Angel of Joy.”

I don’t know where it came from. Maybe because I’d been thinking about how listening to her laugh made me smile. As soon as it was out of my mouth, I desperately wished for a rewind and re-record. Thankfully, Leo saved me from an awkward explanation.

“How’s it looking by you?” I asked in place of a greeting.

“We’re still waiting to get dug out.” He told me. “Every news channel has a different update.”

“Still no plows here either. Though I got to the driveway and sidewalk with the snowblower. It took three rounds.”

“How’s your roommate?” He asked. “Did she settle down? I’m assuming she didn’t call the cops on you since I never got a call from Gurnee P.D.”

“No cops. We sorted it out. Felicity is actually really sweet. You’d like her.”

“Sure.” My brother’s voice hinted that I’d already lost his focus to something else. “So listen, once the streets get cleared, Heidi and I have to go to her parents’ house. Too much snow caved in the roof of their garage. We figured since we’re driving up there anyway, we’re just going to spend the holiday with them and come back around New Year. You okay being on your own this year?”

“Oh. Sure. I don’t mind.” I told him. “Hopefully you can get up there soon.”

“If you want to come with, I can swing by and grab you once the roads open. I just didn’t want you to feel obligated to come and spend time with Heidi’s side of the family.”

“Nah-I’m good. I don’t mind spending Christmas on my own. I have the kids’ gifts here—we can get together when you come back, just call me. I’m on vacation until after the first of the year. You know how it is. I had time I had to burn.”

“Let me know if you need anything.” He said, “I gotta go. Ryder and Dieter are about to come to blows over some XBOX game.”

I wasn’t upset that my brother had to take care of things at the in-laws, but it was unsettling. Mainly because it highlighted the very thing I lacked, but suddenly craved. My wife and I divorced six years ago. In that entire span of time, I honestly thought my chances at any kind of semblance of a family, a happily ever after, were gone. But I wanted it. *People* who cared about you. Who couldn’t wait to get home at night so they could sit on the couch with you and watch whatever bullshit was on TV. To excitedly plan weekend activities or spend hours on Saturday morning at the coffee shop discussing a great book they’d just finished. It wasn’t just about sex. It was about companionship. I was tired of being alone. Yet, that was exactly what I would be on the one holiday that every company, marketing schtick, movie, and song told you wasn’t what the holiday was supposed to be about.

Family. Togetherness. Friendship. Goodwill toward men and all that jazz. Instead, I’d be sitting at the kitchen table my parents had kept from our days in our old house, eating

whatever was left of the tamales my work friend Rosario made for me every year. More than likely, I'd torture myself imagining what a holiday would look like if I had someone like Felicity to come home to.



I would have never pegged her for a Capra fan, but she knew every fucking word to that damn movie. Despite that, she still cried openly and without shame when the town rallied behind old George whatshisname. I couldn't hate on the film though. As the film made her more emotional, she encroached on my sofa real estate. Eventually, ending up tucked beneath my arm.

"Your nose is all red." I tugged on her hair, so she'd look up at me.

"I can't help it," she laughed, using her sweatshirt to clear away the tears running in rivers down her face. "It gets me every time. If only life was like the movies."

"I'm not sure that a movie where the dude loses everything through no fault of his own and is driven to suicide is really the movie you want to wish to emulate."

Her full mouth pulled into a tight line, confusion causing her tear speckled eyelashes to shutter her expressive eyes behind an accusatory squint.

"Wow." She pulled at the string of her hoodie, twisting it around her finger. "That is literally not the point of the movie at all. It's a movie about hope. About people being neighborly

and pitching in to help their friend in need. It's a movie that shows us that even though we may *think* we are alone, there are always people whose lives we have impacted in small ways that we might never know about."

I hadn't intended for my chuckle to appear sardonic. However, based on the slanted eyes and shift in demeanor, that was apparently how Felicity received it.

"All the things we talked about yesterday," I chuckled again to lighten the delivery, before my stupid laughter broke apart the perfect snow globe we existed in.

"Cubs versus White Sox. Garrett's versus Nuts on Clark, Giordano's versus Lou's! You don't take a stand on any of them –but *It's a Wonderful Life* is the hill you choose to die on?"

Her head tilted just enough that a strand of her hair fell in front of her eyes. "Well that, *Parent Trap*, Madonna, and *Gilmore Girls a Year in the Life*." She giggled, then cleared her throat and explained, "Capra is probably my all-time favorite director. I studied him in college."

Her smile couldn't have been more angelic if a choir of angels had accompanied it in six-part harmony.

"Since then, I've become obsessed with his view of the world. Honestly, I think we could all do with some Capra in our lives right about now."

She beguiled me. I knew so little about her, yet I wanted to know so much more. The desire to sit in front of a fire just like we'd been all day and listen to her thoughts on anything and

everything, pulled at me with a hope filled ache in my chest. I wanted to know what books she bee-lined toward in the bookstore. What she watched when she was under the weather. I wanted to crack corny jokes and watch her huff and giggle and roll her eyes at me. And I definitely wanted to kiss her again.

I framed her face with my hands, and she didn't back away. So, I went for it. I intended to pull back after just one pass of my lips against hers. In case of rejection, I could easily write it off as being swept up in the moment. However, she met my kiss with equal passion. What had been sweet exploded into a fiery joining of lips and tongues. I could taste the salt from the popcorn on her lips. Feel the variances in temperature on her tongue from where she'd just sipped from her pop.

“Felicity.”

She pulled away just far enough to look me in the eye while she caught her breath. Other than her name, I was at a loss for words. My brain held up a virtual billboard to my conscience, reminding me she lived in New York—and she was still healing from a breakup. Yet the electricity thrumming through my veins, and my stiff cock, didn't care that she lived in a completely different time zone.

With a desperation I hadn't felt in years, I wanted to yank her across my lap and tell her to use me until she came. But I also dug her as a person and didn't want to fuck that up with a hookup.

“I don’t want this to be weird.” She licked her lips, her fingers playing with the buttons on my Henley.

“Me neither.” I agreed, though my hands refused to accept that memo. They continued to stroke up and down Felicity’s back. With each pass, raising the back of her shirt a bit more. With each centimeter of skin my fingertips tickled over, Felicity inched closer. We hung, suspended with that delicious tension. Unspoken questions formed on my lips. Would it be weirder if we stopped and went on pretending we simply existed until the roads cleared? Or would it be more uncomfortable if we didn’t open the valve to the pressure of our obvious mutual attraction?

“Fuck it.” She said, yanking me toward her mouth.

As badly as I wanted to direct the rodeo, I held back. I wanted her to have the freedom to decide how far she wanted to go. She held my chin, taking what she needed from me as she explored my lips and mouth. With each heated pass of our lips, she moved ever closer to fully straddling me. She wiggled that sumptuous ass of hers up and down my thigh. As hot as watching her get off on my thigh was, I wanted her to experience much more than that.

“Don’t stop, right there. Push harder.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, Felicity and I had moved her into my lap. She panted against my ear, arms wrapped around my shoulders, while she bore down against my thickening cock. Each greedy rock of her hips exposed me to more of her molten heat. Those barely there leggings provided the perfect friction to spirit her straight up to the

summit. Watching her come apart was a thing of beauty. And also a slow torture. I palmed her ass cheeks as she stole her orgasm from me.

I'd wanted to tease her. To hold her on the razor's edge, pressing against her gently until she was delirious with need. But she leapt off that mountain without even looking back.

It would be so easy to tear those leggings and squirm my way inside her welcoming warmth. But until she signaled in any way she wanted to have sex, I'd just slowly die with the torturous sensations of her riding me like a prized show pony. Though the way she moved and ground against my stiff cock had me gritting my teeth to prevent blowing in my sweats.

“Oh fuck, Klaus.”

Those dainty fingernails must have looked beautiful against the gray white of my hair. I imagined them threaded in my hair, a beacon of her pleasure that she yanked with purpose. Her orgasm went on for long moments. Shake after delicious shake against my hips as she panted and keened in my ear.

I held her tight, stroking her hair while she reassembled. I knew the exact moment the heat wore off and sensible thought returned. She'd been soft and pliant seconds before. Then she stiffened and tried to push out of my lap.

“Not weird.” I assured her. “Hot as hell, and something forever burned into my memories.”

Despite that, she slid off my lap, tucked her arms into the sleeves of her sweatshirt, and mumbled something about

needing to use the bathroom. Fuck. So much for not messing up a good thing.

ELEVEN



HOLY SHIT. Actually, I needed new swear words to accurately sum up the searing, blinding heat I'd just dipped my toe into and bathed in. Sure, I spent most of the day wondering what it would be like to kiss Klaus. Especially the more he shared about his life and the way he saw the world.

Did I expect to straddle him like Annie fucking Oakley and ride him toward the dawn? No. Definitely not. I would *barely* be in Chicago for a full week. What the hell was I doing starting something that would only end in heartbreak a week from now?

Truth be told, though; I liked the way I felt around him. Getting cheated on tore me up and broke me down. Especially because Xander's side-piece of choice was essentially a New York City Barbie doll. All perky breasts and tiny waist and thick blonde hair. Such a divergence from what he had that I couldn't help but feel frumpy and undesirable in comparison.

I still hadn't finished lingering over when Klaus called me lovely. I felt those summer sky eyes of his, full of brooding heat on me at random intervals while we watched our movies.

And for the first time in ages, I saw myself for what he saw.
That alone was a huge turn on.

He watched without complaint *It's a Wonderful Life*.
Despite it not being as happy and chipper as his movie had
been, he got sucked into the story as much as I did. When I'd
wiggled closer to him in search of comfort, he provided it
without a second thought. Between the heated stares, then the
consolation of being held by him while I cried? I don't think
I'd ever forget how safe and tended to I felt at that moment.

Me: I may have dry humped my
temporary roommate 🙊📱

I shot off the text to Sera out of habit, forgetting she was
less than thrilled with me at the moment.

Sera: Felicity Cherubim! 🙊 You
JUST MET.

Me: Are you planning to be the pot
or the kettle Ms. Shacked up with a
Stranger and now he's your
boyfriend

Sera: Manfriend. Boyfriend sounds
really ick. Bryce just turned forty-four
definitely not a boy. And he definitely
doesn't fuck like a boy. 😏

Me: 🤪 Seraphim Claire!

Sera: ☹️♀️ It's true tho

Sera: I need details

Me: We were watching Christmas movies. He kissed me, I straddled him. He may or may not have started pushing my hips against his very stiff cock and boom ☹️

Me: Now I'm in the bathroom chatting it up with you because wtf did I do? I don't even live here. I'll be gone in a damn week B!

Sera: I didn't know using a guy's rod for an O meant you were forever beholden to them

Sera: It could just be a one off to get you off ☹️

Me: You have been corrupted. I don't remember you being this level of dirty until you met Bryce 🤪

Sera: ☹️♀️

“Felicity?”

Klaus knocked softly at the door.

“Are you okay? Please don’t be embarrassed. It was...”

I heard him blow out a long breath and could practically imagine him on the other side of the door, running his hand through his gorgeous hair.

“Felicity?” He asked again, knocking harder.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be right out.” I called through the door.

It felt like I peed in my pants. That’s how soaked I’d become after that unexpected dalliance. I tiptoed into my bedroom, trying to dig through my suitcase with just the light from the hallway shining. I needed a new pair of leggings. My candy cane leggings were not dark enough to hide the gigantic wet spot.

“I know you said before we started kissing that you were afraid it would become weird.”

I heard Klaus still talking to the closed bathroom door.

“We got caught up in a moment. It happens. I’ll follow your lead however you want to handle it. If you want to pretend it didn’t happen and just roll on with the rest of the night, cool. That works. If you want to just hang out and leave the door open to seeing how the rest of the week progresses, I’m down with that too. I’m going to go back to the living room. Just know I’m not feeling any kind of emotion that should make you feel weird. You’re a beautiful woman,

Felicity, and that experience might be the highlight of my holiday.”

I became so enthralled with his words, I forgot I was standing naked from the waist down. Leggings balled in my hands, where I’d stopped halfway through getting dressed to listen to his entreaty. Not exactly the best position to get caught in.

“Sorry about that.”

I breezed back into the living room with dry pants on. He noticed. I saw it in the way his eyes took a journey up and down my body. First, it was a passing glance. Then he took a second journey, stopping on my now black leggings. He stared for what felt like long moments. Beneath that cotton, even further down into the veins that carried blood through my body, the heat in his stare that had widened his pupils sent my blood skittering.

“Have there been any updates from the news channels?” I asked, trying to direct that intense, squirm inducing focus away from me.

“They’re making progress.” He said, pointing toward the tv. “They think they’ll reach us by nine or ten tonight.

“Oh! That’s great! I won’t miss Christmas Eve after all!”

He let me off the hook with the pivot to the weather discussion. We locked gazes. Wide, soft eyes that almost felt forlorn replaced his usual pensive squint. That look should have come with an x-ray warning because I could sense that look trying to dig down into my deepest crevice of my soul,

“Yeah.” He licked his lips, rubbing his mouth with an open palm. “You should be good to do whatever you need to by tomorrow morning.”

Somehow, that one sentence felt like a goodbye.

TWELVE



I WORRIED that once the roads opened, she'd pack up her bags and ride off into the sunset. Intellectually, I knew that she'd be gone by the new year, but suddenly tomorrow felt too soon. Feeling her soft body melt against mine, hearing her sweet, panted breaths, and experiencing kissing those supple lips—I felt like a man that had been in the desert for forty years. One drink of water wasn't nearly enough. I needed to jump into a pool of it and gorge my fill.

“Did I hear you on the phone earlier talking about plans for tomorrow?”

Felicity came up behind me in the kitchen while I rustled around trying to figure out what to serve for dinner.

“It was my brother.”

I pulled out my tamales and pozole. Even though it wasn't Christmas yet, it seemed a better and more filling dinner than splitting another pizza. I couldn't in good conscience give her a Hungry Man knowing I had perfect snowy night food.

“Once the roads clear, my brother has to go to his in-law's house. Some problem with the roof. He plans to stay up there

till the New Year.”

“Oh! So he’s letting you stay at his house while he’s away?” She asked.

It hadn’t slipped from my notice that she took a seat at the counter again. She sat in the same spot she had this morning and last night. Her hand rested on her chin while she watched me pull out pots and pans and arrange the food I needed to heat.

When Leo called, it honestly never dawned on me to ask if I could crash at his place. He obviously was so focused he didn’t mention it either. I guess technically I could stay there. But I didn’t want to. I wanted to stay here with Felicity.

“He didn’t say. Just basically wanted to make sure I was okay spending the holidays alone.”

“Oh god.” Her hand went straight to her mouth, covering the lips I couldn’t stop fantasizing about. “That detail didn’t even connect. How awful. I’m so sorry you don’t have anywhere to go!”

“It’s fine.”

Though I wasn’t sure if in all the previous years I’d had my solitude for Christmas, I’d enjoyed being alone; or if I was so deeply enmeshed in telling myself that lie that I believed it didn’t bother me. Sure, I always went over to Leo’s house to spend time with them. But this time, when I told Felicity it was fine, it didn’t feel fine. I already mourned for the loneliness I’d yet to experience.

“For all we know, we’ll still be buried tomorrow.” She offered, twisting her hair around her finger as she said so.

“Maybe.”

I’d already asked the universe once to do me a solid. If I asked a second time? Well, that just seemed really greedy. But I wanted, with all of my being, for Felicity to hang out with me so I didn’t have to spend the holidays alone.

Her phone rang, making us both jump. She grabbed for it, giggling at our reaction to a sudden noise in such a quiet space.

“Bryce?” she asked to whomever was on the other line. “Is everything okay?”

I futzed around with mixing the pozole while I waited for the oil to heat for the tamales. As hard as I tried to focus on my task, I heard Felicity’s conversation, regardless of trying to tune it out.

“No, I won’t say anything to her.”

I chanced a glance in her direction. She’d shifted into the same ramrod straight posture I’d seen from her the first time she’d sat at that stool. When she still wore her pointy boots and her New York City outfit.

“I mean, the roads aren’t even plowed yet. I keep promising her I won’t miss our birthday tomorrow, but honestly Bryce, I’m worried I’m going to have to break that promise. The snow here was up to Klaus’ waist.”

My name on her mouth sent a tingle up my spine. The last time she’d used it, she’d been shouting it in apogee. Her chest

still held the slightest flush, and I wondered if it remained from what we'd done on the couch.

“Oh, he's the guy who owns this Airbnb. We're kind of stuck. The blizzard hit hard and fast up here.”

There was something else that hit hard and fast, too. My attraction to her. My curiosity about what made her tick. Her orgasm. The electricity that rolled in waves every time I glanced her way and she met my gaze.

While she listened to whatever Bryce was saying, she caught my eye and raised her eyebrow, a playful smirk slowly appearing on her lips. I was no mind reader, but if I was a betting man, my money would be on revisiting our *movie intermission*. Her cheeks blushed the sweetest shade of mauve when I winked at her.

“I mean, obviously. I will try to be there. I don't have an oversized heater to melt all the snow between me and my parent's house though. Either way, I'll keep you updated. And when the plow trucks roll through, you'll be the first to know.”

They said their goodbyes, and she hung up.

“How would you feel about spending Christmas Eve with me?” she asked.

Of all the things I thought I'd hear from her. I couldn't thank the universe enough. Someone was listening. For once, Klaus Baer would get a sprinkling of Christmas Magic.

THIRTEEN



OF ALL THE CHRISTMAS MIRACLES. I woke up on Christmas Eve Morning—also known as my birthday—to the news apps reporting opening roads in all directions. It was as if the universe saw my mouth writing all these checks as promises to my family get together, and the universe was like, girl needs some overdraft protection. Send in the plows.

Exactly at 7:17, Sera’s face popped up on my home screen with her ringtone.

“Happy Birthday to you!” I sang to her as I picked up the phone.

“Happy Birthday to You!” she sang to me, and we finished the song, singing it together.

“Did you see? The plows are finally getting to all the side streets. They’re on Prairie now and should get to Mom and Dad’s house in the next hour, I’d say. How is it up by you?”

I’d heard the plows, I’d yet to get out of bed to check though. I scampered out into the living room to take a peek out the front window, forgetting both that there were wood floors throughout the house that were freezing cold, and also

forgetting that I was only wearing a t-shirt that didn't even come to the band of my underwear.

“They haven't yet arrived on our street, yet.” Klaus said from behind me.

“Looks like we're not plowed yet.” I told Sera, trying not to draw attention to the fact that I stood in between the kitchen and the living room, staring straight at Klaus, unable to hide my barely covered body.

He continued to stare at me over a long sip from his coffee mug. His eyes drinking me in with such intense focus, I almost convinced myself my nipples peaked because of his gaze and not the sudden shift in temperature. The feeling of Klaus' attention on me became overwhelming. It made my blood hum and my skin feel too warm. I had to turn back toward the picture window to give myself a second to recompose myself.

“They'll dig us out before dinner, I'm sure of it.”

Bryce called to tell me about some ridiculous surprise he had for Sera. He didn't want it ruined. Given Sera and I wished one another a happy birthday at the time of our birth every year, he said he planned to text again after our call. Super cloak and dagger. It was charming in an annoyingly perfect way.

“I'm so excited Felicity! Bryce has been super sketchy on the details every time I try to nail him down to giving me any kind of a clue what kind of dinner he's planning. It's so cute! He refuses to answer any of my questions and gets all flustered when I ask him too many things.”

I didn't know how to answer that because he'd never really given me a download on what exactly I was supposed to acknowledge knowing about when Sera called.

“He was really light on the details with me, too. I just know we're having dinner and he'll tell me where later. Something about him worrying I'd spill the beans when I talked to you.”

“That's him calling in!” Sera practically sang with excitement. “I'll see you tonight then I guess, since we've been chatting for eleven minutes and therefore I too am officially thirty-six right alongside you twin.”

“Happy Birthday B. I love you infinity.”

“Plus One, A.” she said before disconnecting.

Klaus cleared his throat behind me. I turned toward him as he set his coffee mug down and ran his fingers over his lips before peeling them away to reveal an embarrassed smile.

“I know it's not an ice cream cake... but at least it's half right.”

He stepped aside to reveal three mounds of snow decorated with evergreen branches and pinecones, with a red emergency candle sticking out of the top.

“You made me an ice cake?”

I was across the room in three steps.

“It's your birthday. By birthday law, you need something to mark the occasion. And my guess is it may prove difficult to

get an Instacart driver to bring you one at the moment. So I went for cheeky instead.”

Had anyone ever been that thoughtful? Xander had done nothing remotely close to what a practical stranger did. He sent me the standard dozen roses to the office and dinner at some ridiculously expensive, waitlisted for months restaurant. But never something that so succinctly whispered, *I see you*. I overflowed with tenderness.

“Happy birthday to you.”

He sang for me, lighting his emergency candle on the stove. Damn. His singing voice. Obviously, he’d win no Grammy’s, but the soft, gravel in his voice as he whisper sung had my insides simultaneously melting and sending electricity through my nervous system.

“Thank you.”

My voice sounded barely louder than a whisper. My throat swelled with so much emotion that I couldn’t even eek out a louder sound, let alone functioning words. Instead, I snapped a picture of my cake, and then blew out my candle.

“This might be the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

We were standing too close. I nearly convinced myself I could feel his body heat. I sensed a strange pull between the two of us. His hands came up so slowly, he ensnared my face between his palms before I realized he had me trapped.

“Xander is a fool.”

It was as if his hands held me still while his gazed bored through my eyes, deep into the core of my soul where it throbbed and ached. While it was his hands that held me still, it was those captivating blue eyes that handcuffed me to his gaze. There was too much emotion softening his features. I felt lost at sea. Adrift on a tiny raft in the middle of a gale storm.

“You deserve kindness because, by being born, you are a gift to humanity. You deserve love because everyone needs and thrives on it. But having someone hold you up and remind you every day that you are important and needed? If you were mine—.”

He stopped himself with a shake of his head. I desperately wanted to scream, what? What if I was yours? What did someone who belonged to Klaus Baer deserve that the rest of humanity didn't? I needed to know.

Rather than ask, I grabbed hold of his t-shirt, pressing up to the balls of my feet so I could match his height. The moment before I pressed my lips to his, tiny shards of panic poked at my subconscious. What if he wasn't interested in me? Maybe last night was a fluke, or he remembered I did not actually attract him. Perhaps the snowstorm created some strange bubble of intimacy that made him think he was, but now with clarity of mind, he realized how wrong he'd been. Who knows? Maybe there was some kind of need to breed when forced with the threat of facing your mortal truths, like being stuck until spring in a massive, unmelt-able blizzard.

I pushed past the fear though, snaked my arms between the circle his arms created, and wrapped them around his neck. It

was a mere inch or two between us, but the distance felt like miles. His lips took forever to find mine before they fit against me in such a perfect, delicious, toe curling way.

One Week. Repeated over and again to the pace of our kiss. Who cared? I told that stupid thought. For the first time since Xander it felt *good* to feel the attentions of a man.



“Are you sure you’re okay with coming with me?” I asked again.

Bryce sent me an address downtown on Upper Wacker Drive, told us to dress nicely, and to be there by four o’clock. He would wait out front to show us in. When I’d brought it up on Google Maps, the location was in the same building of the Lyric Opera House. That seemed like a fitting place, given Sera was a trained opera singer.

“I don’t mind at all. In fact, I’m really glad you did.”

Klaus took his eyes off the road for a moment to look over at me.

“I was trying to figure out how to selfishly winnow away some time with you. Especially because I didn’t think you’d stay once the roads opened back up.”

Soon after Bryce texted me, my brother called to see if I wanted to pack up and stay with him once the birthday dinner concluded. But, after the sort of sex with Klaus, I kind of wanted to stay and see where and if that progressed. Plus, I

wanted to learn more about him. What he liked, didn't like, what made him tick.

I turned Rex down, much to his surprise. He didn't seem too enthused about it. When I told him he'd meet Klaus at dinner, he all but promised to size him up accordingly.

I couldn't stop staring at him while he drove. While he'd been absolutely delicious in sweatpants, Klaus in a suit? Motherfuck. He could easily be a sexy Santa. A Santa that went on Keto and did CrossFit.

“You're wearing the shit out of that suit.”

He chuckled, taking my hand in his.

“I'm actually pretty damn relieved. I won't lie. The whole drive back to my condo I worried there wouldn't be anything that fit, wasn't ruined by water damage, and was acceptable enough to wear to this soiree. My dinners with Leo and his family are typically the jeans and t-shirt variety.”

“We rarely do anything fancy for our birthdays. Dinner at my parents' house. They do expect us to wear dresses to Midnight Mass, though.”

“You look beautiful in that dress. Stunning even.”

I nearly swooned. He brought our locked hands to his mouth and kissed my knuckles. I was not a swooner, and this was not a reason to be swooning. It was a peck on the back of my hand. Yet awareness skittered through my entire circulatory system. It whined and balked, demanding I turn up the heat on the sweet gesture.

“Purple’s never really been on my radar.” I explained, “But I had my colors done at Bergdorf’s—that’s a store in New York. I always assumed I was an autumn-you know, because of the red hair and the pale skin. Apparently, I’m actually a winter.”

He played with his lip while watching the road, nodding while I talked.

“Sorry-I know boring fashion talk.”

For all of Xander’s love of the finer things, he really detested shopping or discussions about clothing.

“No need to apologize. It’s not boring. I was just thinking about how different your world is from mine. Most of my closet is Old Navy. This suit was more than likely on the ninety-nine-dollar rack at Men’s Warehouse.”

It was just an observation. The fact he was comparing “worlds” meant nothing other than he took notice of our differences. That was it.

“I love Old Navy.” I sighed, getting distracted by all the Christmas lights that flew by my window. “Unfortunately, I can’t wear them to work. If we wear jeans, they have to be of a certain quality and cost—and usually they don’t want us wearing denim colors. Colored jeans are fine. Black is preferred. Sometimes you can even get away with a really dark jean but standard indigo blue is a nonstarter.”

“Do you like your job?” Klaus asked while we crawled toward the city in more-than-typical gridlock, given the freshly plowed roads. I’d padded time in just in case, but we were still

easily forty-five minutes out and I worried we'd really be cutting it way too close for comfort.

“That’s a weird question to ask.” I huffed a half laugh.

“I just couldn’t imagine living under that kind of microscope of scrutiny every single day. Having your value determined by whose clothes you wore and what size you are. It seems really defeating. How does anyone develop any kind of sense of self? Especially if you’re just an average person with average looks and not blessed with the genes to be appealing enough for the masses?”

“But it’s fun too, and I can’t complain about the pay either.”

I don’t know why I felt like I had to defend an industry that I bemoaned on the daily to Xander when we’d still been together.

“If you could do anything in the world, would working at a celebrity gossip tv show be your dream job? Is that what you went into film and television for?”

“No.” I admitted. “I actually wanted to be a documentary film maker, but I needed a job to pay the rent.”

The anteroom in my soul, that held onto my basest dream, opened effortlessly. Without even a second thought. Few people knew about that dream. Sera, Rex, my parents. Though they’d been the ones to tell me when I graduated, I needed a job that paid the rent.

“BuzzTv was hiring in their production studio doing basic work—filing away b-roll film and keeping the digital libraries

organized. Then I got swept up.” I told Klaus.

It happened too easily and so fast. When I went home for my five-year reunion, everyone thought I was so cool. They gushed over how jealous they were about my job. My private school routinely called me for donations to their annual fundraiser. Even my parents would gush over me to their friends.

“I love documentaries.” He smiled and glanced my way.

“I figured. There were a lot listed on your Prime account.”

Bryce: What’s your eta?

Me: We’re about to exit the expressway probs 10 mins out

“**W**hat kind of filmmaker would you be?” He asked, pulling my focus away from updating Bryce on our location.

“I’m not a hundred percent sure. When I was in college, I wanted to be journalistic in my documentaries. Exposing maleficence, sticking it to the man, the whole nine. Now I think I would want to go in search of the joy. There’s enough shit in this world, you know? Maybe that’s why so many people turn to celebrity gossip and reality tv. Call it aspirational voyeurism, but maybe people just want to not feel like garbage for thirty minutes. We’re told to hate this person

or point a finger at this group—life has just turned so bleak. I think if I were to take the Joseph Campbell approach and follow my bliss—it would be to highlight joy in the mundane.”

“Well, if I ever find that dream job where I’m cutting the checks to give money away to people in need, you’ll be my first grant. I think that is a very worthwhile thing to invest in.”

It felt like the most natural thing in the world. His hand caressing my thigh. As if he had every right to have access to my personhood whenever he wanted. Except we’d just met. We apparently remembered that fact at the same time. His hand went from a gentle caress to a robotic pat, and then back to ten and two on the steering wheel.

Bryce: We’re cutting it close. Really close. Any chance you can step on it?

“**W**hat the hell? Bryce just texted me and is all like you need to step on it, we’re cutting it close. Surely they’ll hold the damn table for five extra minutes. We’re almost there.”

Me: Just go to the table. We’ll find you. It’s not that big of a deal.

Bryce: Not a table. You’ll see when you get here. Please hurry.

Klaus gave his car some gas and cut through some alleys that I honestly wasn't sure his Jeep would fit down. But thanks to his *Borne Identity* esque driving skills, we pulled up to the location, spotting Bryce pacing impatiently back and forth in front of a valet stand.

“Leave the keys for the valet.” He opened the door and held his hand out to help me out of the car. “We’ve got maybe five minutes to get upstairs and to our box.”

Klaus came around next to me, buttoning his jacket in a very James Bond way that had my insides fluttering. He nodded his hello to Bryce and fell into step next to me, his hand on my back as we stepped through the doors of the opera house. We followed Bryce down a hall and through a dark curtain that opened out onto the stage. We definitely were not at dinner, but at the actual opera. Sera was nowhere in sight. Rex sat next to a woman I'd literally never seen before. I'd been about to ask him who she was when my dad stood and yanked me into a hug.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart!” he kissed my temple before scooting past me to introduce himself to Klaus.

“I don't want to interrupt the greetings.” Bryce whispered. “We need to get seated. Sera is going to be on stage in two minutes and thirty seconds.”

Sera was *going to be on stage*? It was then that I noticed a miniature group of people seated across the aisle. They all clapped and hooted as quietly as they could. Obviously, Bryce installed a cheering section for Sera made up of their friends.

The lights went down, and a spotlight shone in the stage's corner. With the swell of the orchestra, Sera appeared, chin jutted, marching as if the world owed her back pay on a hundred-year-old debt. As her sister, I'd heard her sing my whole life. I'd been by her side through every high school and college performance. But I'd never seen her like that. Transformed. It was the only word I could think of.

It was a long piece, giving me plenty of time to observe those in the box while listening to Sera sing her heart out. The amount of pride coming out of our box was overwhelming. My mother, of course, was crying as per usual. But even my dad beamed. I don't think I'd ever seen him smile so wide.

It was Bryce who stole my breath, though. I'd obviously watched their relationship from the beginning, but I'd never *witnessed* it. He stared at Sera with too many emotions on his face to name. I could see the pride just like my parents, but it was more. Like a soul-deep level of satisfaction, seeing Sera sing her dream role. I couldn't stop staring at him.

Just as I replayed my life with Xander desperate to find anything between us that ever felt similar, Klaus took my hand in his. That squeeze was enough to pull me back from that cliff. It grounded me. Gave me something else to focus on. Like the way my pulse folded back on itself whenever I felt him touch me. It was almost like my heart stopped for a second, shocked that we were feeling some kind of romantic sensation, and then it remembered it was supposed to be keeping our body alive.

The aria completed and Sera flipped her dress, spun, and stormed off the stage. The sheer weight of talent she possessed glued me to my seat. And balls. She had some major balls.

“Your sister is incredible.” Klaus leaned over and whispered in my ear. “Who knew one family could possess so much talent?”

What talent did I have?

“Sera’s the talented one. Trust me, I’ve heard it my whole life.”

“She may have the more obvious talent, but I wouldn’t sell yourself short princess. You have talent in spades.”

I wanted to pursue that comment, but Bryce stood and ushered us back down to the main floor where we congregated waiting for instructions.

“Sera should be up here any minute. I made reservations upstairs for dinner. If you want to head on up, we’ll join you in a moment.”

Bryce hadn’t just made reservations, he’d taken out the private event area with a chef who had an entire menu planned specific to us and our celebration.

“You must be the twin.”

A tattooed man sat down next to where me and Klaus took our seats, across from my brother and the woman I’d yet to meet, and kitty corner to my parents.

“I’m Bear—or Ted—I go by either, really. I’m one half of the Bear and Raven show. This is my wife, Marley. I swear

you feel like my sister, too. Sera talks about you all the time. She's been counting down your arrival since October." He laughed, taking a sip from his water goblet.

He had tattoos *everywhere*. Even on his fingers. I couldn't look away. And in a fascinating dichotomy, his wife looked like she'd stepped right out of a Disney movie where she starred as the princess. Long, flowing blonde hair, flawless skin, dressed in a gorgeous red lace dress.

"Over here to my left," He pointed, pulling me from my silent musings, "Hillary Sloan Morder, her husband Bert and Genevieve Hursch Wellington and her husband Cain. We all think Sera is just the greatest. Singing ability aside, she is so damn talented and we're incredibly lucky that she joined the Hursch Team."

My mom preened so hard I thought peacock feathers would bust out her ass. She and my dad got out of their seats and came around to the table to my left so they could sit and chat about how wonderful Sera was while we waited for her to arrive.

"Some night." Rex took my hand in his and squeezed. "Happy birthday, sweetheart."

"Agreed." I smiled, though I knew he'd know it wasn't a genuine smile. "Thank you for remembering two of us were born today."

Klaus' arm went around my shoulders and slid down my back, soothing some of my frayed nerves. Rex did not miss the gesture at all. I nearly imagined I heard him growl.

“You must be Klaus.” He held his hand out. “Dr. Rex Miller.”

“Don’t let him intimidate you.” I told Klaus. “He’s a PhD, not a medical doctor.”

“Which one is supposed to be more intimidating?” Klaus asked me with a wink before turning to shake Rex’s hand.

“Klaus Baer, nice to meet you. I’d love to be introduced to your girlfriend as well.” He extended his hand to her with a smile.

I was desperate to know who she was as well. My brother was a bit of a mystery. There were clearly things I didn’t know about my brother. I’d lived with him for the last seven months, though. I felt like if he had a girlfriend, surely I would have known about her by now.

“Regina is a business associate.” My brother explained, resting his arm on the back of her chair, “she had to fly into Chicago with me because we have intersecting business interests. Since she had no place to go, I asked her to join me. No one should have to be alone in a hotel room on Christmas. She’ll be joining us at the house as well tomorrow. Mom is already rearranging the menu so that she can properly impress the new guest.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Felicity. I’ve heard about you over the last few weeks. I feel like I know you already.”

Regina. The name sounded so familiar, but I couldn’t place why. She didn’t look familiar to me at all. I repeatedly stared at her. If someone would have asked me to describe Rex’s idea

woman, I would have pegged his tastes to lean toward blonde barbie dolls. But Regina had lush, jet-black hair, brilliant jade green eyes, and a figure that definitely had some meat to it.

“So why again are you in the same house as my sister?” Rex asked, throwing the first pitch of the evening in obsessive and protective older brother fashion.

Jesus, where were Bryce and Sera? He said they’d be right behind us and yet ten minutes passed, and they still weren’t anywhere to be seen. I busied myself with pouring a glass of wine set out for the table, offering some to Klaus while he and my brother discussed his broken pipes and stolen identity.

“Do you have any idea how your identity got stolen, or where the breach was?” Rex asked.

“Unfortunately, I do.” Klaus tipped his glass, watching the wine I just poured circle around and around. “I work for the state crisis line. Sometimes there are people who are *repeat customers*, so-to-speak. And this one woman, she was a domestic abuse survivor, trying to get on her feet. I’d spoken to her quite a few times, helping her through various situations. I did a dumb thing. One that if it got out, I could probably lose my job.”

He took a deep breath, took two huge gulps of wine, looked over at me, and continued.

“I put my name on her lease. She, of course, had the resources available to her through the state, but something scared her. She wanted to get an apartment of her own, not a state sponsored house. I stupidly forgot that if she was on the lease as well, she’d have access to my name, address, social

security number. It doesn't matter now, the damage is done. But she took out lines of credit in the form of a credit card, a car, all kinds of shit. When I went to finance my attempt at buying a new car, I discovered her little shopping spree. She isn't at the apartment. Hasn't been there in about four months, according to the landlord trying to collect back pay from me. I just wish I knew where she was. She wouldn't have run unless she was genuinely afraid. I hope wherever she ran off to that she's okay."

He was a much better person than I would be. If my life was in ruins because of extending a kindness, I don't know if I could still continue to be a nice person. I'd one hundred percent become the grinchiest grinch that ever grinched.

"I might be able to help you." Rex told him. "My company works with a lot of data warehouses. They can probably figure out a way to extract those hits from your report to you having to shut down your social security number and re-establish credit on a new one."

"How does someone who writes personality tests have connections to data warehouses?" I asked.

"Several reasons, actually." Rex began, "The main one being I don't *write personality tests*, sweetheart. That's a simplified version of what my company *that I own* does."

I was about to ask him exactly what he does, but the table full of Sera's friends erupted into shouts and cheers. Sera walked in, beaming so brightly I thought she'd shoot up into the sky and become a star. Bryce followed behind, clapping in her direction.

The entire room stood and rushed to Sera to hug her and congratulate her. Her friends all wished her a happy birthday while they surrounded her, and my mom told her a second-by-second story of her reaction to Sera singing on stage.

“Thank you all for coming tonight.” Bryce took two glasses of champagne from the waiter that followed them into the room. “I know that it’s Christmas Eve and to our friends especially, I’m sure getting sitters and coming here the night before Santa arrives probably isn’t the most convenient. But I am so appreciative to you for helping me make this night so special for the woman who bathes my life in sunshine. It was so important to me that the birthday girl had the most important people in her life surrounding her tonight. I’m grateful to each one of you for attending. Sera,” he turned to her glass in hand.

I held my breath, expecting him to pull a ring out of his pocket and propose on the spot. Why else would he bring these people together on a day that was just for our immediate family? That’s what the Millers did. Christmas Eve was for Sera and me.

“Having you by my side is the best dream realized. When this opportunity presented itself, I knew there was nothing I wanted more than to ensure every single dream you ever had or have comes true. Happy birthday Angel.”

The room erupted once again in well wishes for Sera. Sera alone. Not a single person remembered that someone else was born on Christmas Eve. Eleven minutes prior, in fact. Happy birthday Felicity, also.

FOURTEEN



THE MILLERS obviously were not my family, so I had no right to feel any kind of way. However, seeing the light dim in Felicity’s eyes as the night progressed made something inside of me want to stand in front of her and bare my teeth to anyone who stepped near her. She smiled and chatted with everyone, hugged her sister, and congratulated her. But I saw it. The moment the attention turned away from Felicity, her smile would falter. It would happen in a glimpse, so quickly that had I not been making a case study of her expressions, I would miss it too.

“Did you do anything for your birthday today, honey?” Her dad finally asked her as our meal got plated.

“Silly me, I thought this was going to be the special birthday thing.” She said, taking another sip of wine.

“We’re all together.” Her mom said, “Even Rex is here. This is the most special birthday we’ve had in ages! The three of you have made me so happy by all coming home this year.”

“What about this morning?” Regina asked Felicity.

“We were just getting dug out from the storm.” She told her. “But I got an ice cake.”

“You get an ice cream cake every year.” Rex laughed. “How on earth did you get one in the middle of a blizzard?”

Felicity turned to face me, a smile appearing like the first sun after the equinox. It lit me from the inside. I watched while she unlocked her phone and called up her pictures, and passed her phone to Regina.

“No, not ice cream. Ice. Well, probably more snow than ice. Klaus made it for me this morning out of snow, and pinecones, and evergreen branches.”

Regina gasped and looked at me, her hand covering her mouth.

“That is precious.” She said. “Can I use that? For my blog? I’ll keep your names off it, but the sweetness of that story? People would eat it up.”

“You have a blog too?” I asked, glancing over at Sera and Bryce making the rounds to their table of friends.

“Not that kind of blog. I run a dating site. I put sweet stories about love and romance on the website to draw potential users to the site.”

“Oh my god.” Felicity practically knocked the wine glass off the table, she smacked the table so hard. “Now I know why your name sounds so familiar! I’ve been sitting here all night wracking my brain trying to figure out how I know you. But I don’t know you. I’ve just *heard* about you. Well—about how you’re screwing over my brother’s company.”

“Pudge—that’s enough.”

Rex’s bark was so abrupt, and so domineering, an entire room full of conversation screeched to a halt, simultaneously. Felicity fell back against her chair, as if his words had physically pierced her personhood. I thought for sure she was going to bite back. That I was about to witness an epic verbal dress down amid this fancy assed white glove dinner. Instead, she made a squeak like a wounded animal, pushed out of her chair, and took off out of the room.

“Excuse me?”

The bark-like sound coming out of my mouth was foreign even to me. It sounded feral. Like a wolf spiking its hackles in challenge.

“What did you just call your sister?”

“It’s okay,” Sera said from the head of the table. “It’s a nickname. He’s been using it since we were kids. I’m Pidge and she’s Pudge. I don’t even know where they came from. But it’s not meant as an insult.”

“Then perhaps he should refrain from using it when he’s in a room full of strangers and trying to bring his sister to heel by embarrassing her.” I said to Sera.

I didn’t intend to cause a scene. I’d planned to come to this thing, keep Felicity company, and go home. I’d never expected my interest in Felicity to deepen and bloom in hours. And I certainly had never imagined I would be defending her honor on our first date. If that’s what this was.

“Do you *really* think that’s an appropriate nickname?” I asked Rex, pointing an accusatory finger in his direction. At six feet, I certainly wasn’t short by any estimation. I regularly punched my proverbial clock at the gym. My desk job is not doing any favors for my metabolism. But Rex was a bear in human form. A clean-cut bear, but he was easily six four, two-fifty if I had to guess. Meaning, he could snap me like a damn toothpick. Yet, I persisted.

“And right now? You choose this of all times to snap at her? You know better than anyone else how backed into a corner she feels.”

“Why on earth would Felicity feel backed into a corner?” Sera asked.

It wasn’t her fault. She rode a high from tonight that surely had euphoria, drowning out her situational awareness. It was well wishes from friends, and the adoring looks from her boyfriend, and compliments abound. There was no way she could process all of that stimulus while also process the tension rolling off her sister in waves.

“Has anyone wished Felicity a Happy Birthday this evening?” I asked, knowing the answer.

Sera’s mouth dropped open, her eyes broadcasting a rolling tumult of emotions.

“You better go find her and apologize.” I told Rex.

When he stood up, it was to follow her out the door and not to land a right hook against my jaw.

FIFTEEN



THERE WAS NOWHERE TO GO. Downstairs was a log jam of exiting theater goers, headed off to whatever remained of their Christmas Eve's. The bathroom hallway was too small and didn't have enough room to pace. Besides, both bathrooms sat directly across from one another, so it wasn't like I'd have much privacy to seethe.

Fuck Rex. Fuck him. This stupid day. And definitely my soon-to-be brother-in-law.

"Pudge." I heard a soft whisper behind me.

"Go away, Rex."

"If that's truly what you want, I won't push. But at least let me apologize first."

He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking contrite. I'd seen him in business suits nearly every day over the last seven months. But he looked different somehow. Maybe this was a more special occasion suit and less a business suit, but it felt as if he'd attempted to look really, exceptionally handsome today instead of just his standard level of handsome. I wondered, offhand, if he and Regina were actually more than

just business associates. But that was a question for a different time.

“Regina and I are both in the midst of hostile negotiations with a larger corporation, attempting to force us out of business. We each have intellectual property this larger company wants to steal in order to corner an enormous market in behavior prediction and analytics. Yes, she, up until a few weeks ago, *was* a competitor. However, we realized that the enemy of our enemy is our friend.

“Our agreement is new, and we’re still trying to figure one another out and trust the other won’t try to hamstring them. I brought her to our family dinner as both a show of trust, but also so that she could see a different side of me other than the asshole CEO that doesn’t back down from a fight. I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

As he continued his entreaty, he stepped closer, as if trying to coax a spooked animal. The timid way he kept shuffling toward me honestly pissed me off even more. But my desire to learn more about this other side of him held me in place.

“I was afraid that if you mentioned all the times I’d talked badly about her out of frustration and fear over the last few weeks, it might break the fragile truce we’ve come to.”

I couldn’t stay mad at Rex. And not just because I was staying at his house *rent free*. He saw and understood me in a way that no one else did.

“Am I the asshole, Rex?”

“She’s just really excited.” He pointed toward the room where we could hear the party still going strong. “Bryce surprised her with this. She probably isn’t even aware of the fact that you got overshadowed.”

He opened his arms, and I fell into them. His hug quieted the malaise. He was the only man I knew that never broke a hug first. It was my favorite thing about my brother.

“I brought your purse.” Klaus said, holding up my sequined clutch. “Just in case you wanted to make a quick getaway.”

Quick getaway. Those were possibly the best words I’d ever heard a man say to me in my life. He winked at me and passed my clutch off, reaching to shake Rex’s hand.

“Let me give you my card.” Rex said, reaching into his pocket to pull out his wallet. “I’ll put my team on it personally.”

“Can you tell Mom that I won’t be coming to Midnight Mass?” I asked Rex, kissing his cheek and pulling him in for one more hug.

“You owe me.” He said, with a chagrined smile.



For most of the car ride home, we rode in silence, except for the Christmas carols playing on the radio. I wasn’t ready yet to talk about it. I didn’t want to be judged. For someone else to tell me I was being selfish, and I should be happy for

my sister. Especially not from Klaus. Because whether I could admit it out loud—I wanted to do more than just kiss him.

“Am I being unreasonable?” I asked eventually, needing to know from someone not emotionally attached to the situation.

“About being hurt?” He asked, chancing a glance in my direction. “Absolutely not. You can’t control what hurts you. It’s natural that you’d feel slighted or less than he or Sera presented this celebration as something for the both you—since you’re born on the same day. You got kind of bait and switched.”

“That’s how I feel.” I told him. “He didn’t communicate that it was a birthday just for Sera. The way Sera had been talking all week, she said he planned for all of us to spend time together. I guess I assumed that meant us—me and Sera—for our birthday. The one we share.”

“I honestly don’t think it was intentional. Not that I think you believe that. But Bryce doesn’t realize what he did. He just wanted to give his girlfriend an amazing birthday because he loves her. That love is so deep, and so intense that he used every resource he has available to him and gifted her a dream realized. To be honest, I’m kind of jealous and I barely even know him. To be so in love with someone that you’re that invested in their happiness? An opportunity arose to provide her an avenue to see her dream through and jumped at it. It will be hard to top that one for the rest of their years together.”

Klaus laughed before going quiet. For a second, I thought he finished his thought and was about to respond when he asked me, “Do you know who Marshall Field is?”

“I don’t think you can grow up in Chicago and not know who he is.”

I had so many memories of us as kids dressing up in our best dresses and going downtown to State Street to visit the flagship store. We’d walk the blocks to see the department store windows decorated for the holidays, and then have pie and hot chocolate in the Walnut Room on the eighth floor.

“Did you know he had a brother, Joseph Field?”

“That I did not know.” I admitted.

“His brother is actually the reason that he moved to Chicago. He’d been working on his parent’s farm in Massachusetts. When his dad sold the farm to the eldest Field brother, Marshall set out on his own. He came to Chicago, where his brother worked for a mercantile company, and he was actually the one that introduced Marshall to his eventual partners. The ones that would be the beginnings of The Marshall Field and Company. Even though *Marshall* Field is the famous one, the one who everyone remembers, it was *Joseph* Field that convinced him to donate land to the University of Chicago, to write the endowment for the Field Museum. In fact, nearly all the work outside of running the store and his wholesale business was actually the responsibility of his brother. So while Marshall might be the famous one, Joseph was his backbone. Without his support, Marshall couldn’t succeed.”

“Was that supposed to make me feel better?” I chuckled, “Because it sounded like Joseph got the shit end of the sibling stick too—forever living in Marshall’s shadow.”

Klaus took my hand in his and ran his lips along my knuckles. That was twice in one day. Sensation overwhelmed my brain. Those kinds of delicious feelings I wanted to exist in forever.

“Do you think the two of them could have run a successful business together for fifty-something years if Joseph truly felt overshadowed by his brother? Marshall felt comfortable existing in the spotlight. That’s what was inherent to his nature. Joseph, it seems, preferred to be the silent partner, doing his work quietly in the background.

“While the two of you are twins, you are two different people with different motivations and skills. Sera is outwardly motivated by praise and performance. Just as Marshall Field was. You, sweet princess, work behind the scenes, away from the camera and the spotlight. It’s where you are comfortable. Where you thrive. Preparing those in the spotlight as best you can.”

Holy shit.

“But is it an example of the chicken and the egg theory?” I posited. “Am I comfortable being behind the scenes because they forced me into that role? If my mom put me into voice lessons, and dance lessons and all the other millions of things that Sera was—would I enjoy the spotlight too? Or has it always been inherent in my nature?”

“Sounds like a question for you mom.” He said.

“Or my brother.” I laughed, “This is Rex’s wheelhouse. If I called him right now, we’d probably be until three in the

morning going further and further down a discussion rabbit hole.”

We spent most of the ride home discussing nature versus nurture, behavior theory, birth order theory, and a million other super esoteric topics that would seem out of place for a post-Christmas Eve discussion. Though my brain fired on all of its cylinders. Holding such an in-depth conversation with someone who clearly was my intellectual equal had me turned the hell on.

As if the discussion of his expertise alone sent up his spidey senses, I received a text message from Rex as we rounded the corner to the Airbnb.

Rex: I fell on the sword and also backed out of Midnight Mass. So she was madder with me, first. Then I announced to the table that you weren't feeling well and that we'd see you in the morning. It's the least I can do since I embarrassed you at dinner. 😞

Rex: Your “friend” has some stones, by the way. Standing up to your big brother in front of your entire family? Took guts. I like this for you, sweetheart. See you tomorrow. xo

He stood up to my brother? I'd need to get more details on that at another time. Seeing those words from Rex had my libido jumping from simmer to boil.

“Pulling up to a house with Christmas lights almost tricked me into convincing me that this weird domestic fairy tale was actually reality.” He laughed, unlocking the door. “Honey, we're home. I'll put the kids to bed, you grab the presents from the garage. They're hidden behind my tool chest.”

There was something oddly specific about that jested comment that had my heart constricting. As if he'd imagined that very scenario on other Christmases. He pushed the door open for me to walk past him and inside. I couldn't just brush past him, though. Not after that tiny peek into what existed in his soul.

The salt and pepper five o'clock shadow along his jaw called to my hands. It tickled against the pads of my fingers as I held him in place to kiss him, long and slow. I wanted to fall backward into his fantasy as well. To be cared for. Seen. Protected. Just for one night.

SIXTEEN



IT FELT UNREAL. Like I'd spent too many minutes imagining a similar scenario on the way home from dinner. My brain had to have fallen into a waking dream. Any minute Felicity would call my name in the seat next to me and I'd realize I was still on the Edens twenty minutes away from home. I couldn't possibly be standing in her bedroom, kissing her neck while helping her out of her dress.

"I must be dreaming."

She laughed, turning in my arms. "Not a dream, unless we're sharing the same one."

Her dress fell to the ground on a sigh gathering around the pointy heeled boots still on her feet.

"Fuck. Felicity, you're too much princess."

There she stood in the most cock thickening bra and panty set. Deep purple lace that nearly matched the dress she wore and barely hid the pink nipples beneath.

"As much as I desperately want to feel those shoes on my back, they're covered in snow and salt, so that fantasy will have to wait for some other time. But seeing you in just

lingerie and those boots is a picture that I will keep filed away whenever I need some *inspiration*.”

I loved hearing her gasp and watching her cheeks flush.

“Felicity, you are a vision.”

Gooseflesh rose on her skin everywhere my fingertips caressed. I took my time exploring her expanse of skin before finally kneeling.

“Sit on the bed for me.” Once she obliged, I took hold of her boot and unzipped it.

It took much more focus than I thought it would, given I could see her delectable mound presented for me between her ample thighs. It took me two reminders that my head would be between her legs soon, before I could settle. The night would not end without experiencing being crushed between them as I feasted on her.

I’ve never been a foot person. Giving or receiving a massage occasionally? Sure. But the act of worshipping someone’s feet has never been a thing for me. Until I saw the sweet ornaments painted on Felicity’s toes. They matched the ones on her fingertips, and I would be remiss to not at least show my appreciation for such adorable artwork that rarely saw the light of day in the winter.

After kissing each pad, pressing my thumbs into her arches as I did, I made my way up her calves with both hands and mouth. Her keens, moans, and soft sighs were a symphony I tried desperately to commit to memory so I could revisit it when this was just a distant memory.

I was a realist. The two of us came from very different worlds and existed in totally different states. But the chemistry between the two of us was undeniable, and I would enjoy what we had while we had it—future be damned.

I'd expected her panties to be rough and abrasive. The lace pattern was so intricate, I'd expected it to abrade my tongue as I teased her through them. However, it was as soft as the skin hiding beneath. The satiny feel tickling at my lips and sending pleased waves down my spine.

“It's too much.” Felicity whisper groaned, “I can't take it.”

Her hips thrust and wiggled in a seductive circle, as if to entice me to move along to the main event.

“Too much?” I chuckled, hooking her panties to the side and taking the smallest taste. “I'm just getting started and you're asking me to tap out? Not a chance, princess. If this is a onetime thing—I'm going to get my fill.”

The moment my tongue came in contact with her soft slit, her hips launched from the bed, nearly causing me to bite my tongue. If that was the reaction from a singular, playful lick, I couldn't wait to see what she did when I really put some effort into it. Eventually.

“Where are you going?”

She sounded panicked when I pushed off the bed and stood above her, visually feasting on the beauty sprawled out for me. While I untied my tie, unbuttoned and removed my shirt, unbuckled my belt, and removed my pants, I watched her shimmy and wiggle beneath my stare. My cock throbbed for

her. From the seductive way her curls fanned out against the pillows, her breasts pushed together and up in that bra, the peeks of her nipples jutting against the lace of her bra, to the softness of her belly and thighs. I couldn't get enough of it. It was delicious torture to hang between wanting to slow my undressing so I could spend those extra seconds committing every detail to memory, and yanking off all my clothing and diving into our coupling caveman style.

“I don't have any condoms.”

My damn luck, the first beginnings of attraction in years, and the pitcher is about to call a foul for my lack of a catcher.

“I haven't had sex since my divorce. We once talked about starting a family—without too many details killing the mood. They tested me for STDs then. I'm clean, but being prepared with a rubber in my wallet hasn't been on my radar since college. There's plenty we can still do without the sex. But you should know, while we still both have all of our faculties.”

She chewed on her lip, drawing me into the ocean of her bramble-colored eyes like a mermaid pulling an unwitting sailor toward shore.

“I test every three months.” She said. “Because of... well, you know. If we end up getting to a place where we want to take it that far—I'm clean. And, I have an IUD because well, you know, same person for years.”

“Tell me what you want, Felicity. The birthday girl should get every wish come true on her special day.”

I stood there, looking at this beautiful creature who was so desperate for me she couldn't sit still. How had my luck changed so quickly? She was perfect for me and delivered right to my door. Selfishly, I wanted to devour her.

“I find myself desperate to fulfill every one of your wildest desires, Felicity. Even if it takes all night—or multiple nights. The rest of your vacation if we need it.”

I stepped out of my briefs, fisting my cock. I watched her watch me, her eyes hooded with desire, and her hips shimmying in tandem with my pulls. Rather than reply to my request, she bit her lip and shook her head, spreading her legs even further open than she'd been previously.

“I don't want to lead.” She said, “I want to follow.”

The sound of my groan bounced off the walls and the ceiling. It took everything in me not to fall into bed and bury my face in her pussy. She wanted to follow. She was absolutely perfect. Starting this was gonna be the biggest damn mistake of my life. How would one week with her ever be enough?

SEVENTEEN



I DON'T THINK I'd ever spoken so plainly about what I wanted before. Maybe I had with Xander and it just became gray matter in a relationship to nowhere. But when Klaus groaned in response to my request? I felt that groan through every nerve ending in my body. Deeper than my nerves. In my soft tissue, and further, way in the primary synapses of my brain.

“Princess, I don't know if you understand what you just asked for, but you're going to get the most perfect end to your birthday. You're going to be so far in the stratosphere, we may need to send a search party out for you in the morning.”

The five o'clock shadow abraded my thighs as he made a map of every inch of skin with his lips and tongue. He wasn't anywhere near where I wanted him, but already I keened and begged. I wouldn't be able to still my body from the overwhelming tidal wave of pleasure, even if I'd wanted to.

“Don't hold back.” He told me, pulling aside the elastic that covered my mound once again. “I want to feel everything. To be crushed between your legs, suffocated by this beautiful pussy.”

His fingers caressed along my slit, opening me up for his perusal, taking a gentle swipe at my swollen clit before putting the elastic back in place again.

“But don’t think I plan to rush this. You can beg and swear, demand I speed things up, but princess, you’re on my clock now. In my matrix, we move at quarter speed.”

I should have realized the foreshadowing of that wicked grin and arched eyebrow. Unfortunately, I was already losing conscious thought and falling backward into base, primal need howling for relief and satisfaction. He promised he would deliver. My body and brain at that moment didn’t care about the words he spoke. It was too hyper focused on the few touches that already had me wound tightly and primed to explode.

“My record is three.” He told me. “I think I may be able to break that one tonight. What do you think?”

Whatever he said made no sense to me. I just nodded, pushing my ass off the bed and closer to his face, hoping he’d take the hint.

“Nuh-uh.” He held them down. “You told me you wanted to follow, not lead. That doesn’t look like a follower to me.”

He removed my panties in one swift motion, collecting my knees in his hands and rolling me up like a rag doll. I felt wanton and exposed, yet I needed more. The thought barely surfaced, and he had my legs hooked over his shoulder and his mouth defiling my pussy with ardor.

I didn't need to coach him as to what I liked or how I wanted it. Thank god, honestly, because I had no voice. No ability to even form a coherent sentence. He was everywhere, licking and teasing in places I wasn't even aware produced sensations. All I *could* do was hang on and follow where he took me. And that location was mindless pleasure. I hung between never wanting him to stop and needing him to send me over.

“Please Klaus.”

I wasn't sure what exactly I begged for. Maybe in just speaking the words, I hoped to release the valve and ease the pressure. No matter where I moved, he was there. However I shifted, thrust, bounced, or jerked. He grunted, moaned, keened, or growled in response and doubled down on his efforts.

“It's coming.” I told him.

Whether it was a warning or a prayer, I couldn't tell. It didn't matter. The moment I voiced the warning he stopped completely.

“Wha—? Why did you stop?”

I had no breath. Could barely move enough to lift my head to see what Klaus was doing. The need felt so heavy it was as if I'd been encased in concrete.

“Do you want to follow, or do you want to lead?” He asked. “You said you wanted to follow. And if you're following, you'll come when I let you. I loved those pretty

words like please dripping from your lips though, princess. Maybe a few more of those and I'll reconsider."

I'd been about to protest when he dove back in and wound me back up again. The sensations tripled in their intensity and my mind shorted out, threatening to detach completely.

"Please."

I panted, pulling at his hair, trying to hang on for dear life. The summit was just in sight. There was no preparation for how intense it was. I needed more than Klaus' short hair to keep me in place. Blindly, I reached for anything to grab hold of. Anything that would tether me as he flung me into the stratosphere.

"More." He grumbled against my skin.

"Please Klaus. Please. I need it. I don't think I can take anymore."

"Better." He kissed my thighs on either side, nuzzling against my skin, but ceasing from the ministrations I desperately begged for in order to be escorted to my completion.

Just when I thought I'd lose my mind with blinding need, Klaus affixed his mouth to my pussy as if kissing my mouth. It was violent in the gentlest way. An explosion of sensation that robbed my sight and suspended me breathless and keening before ripping through me like a great beam of blinding light. It seemed like it went on forever. The shaking spasms that delivered pulse after mind melting pulse of pleasure so intense

my lips went numb and my muscles lost their ability to hold me in any position but jellyfish.

“That was beautiful.”

Klaus worked his way up my body, working my bra straps away from my body and lifting my breast to his mouth.

“I want to see you do that again.”

There was no way in hell I'd be able to honor that request. Could you paralyze your body from sheer pleasure? Because presently, I was only capable of the most minute movements. Yet, the moment he said the words, my core clenched with a need to feel him deep inside me.

EIGHTEEN



I WAS afraid to go anywhere near my cock. Even the gentle tickle of air from the heat vent was too much sensation. Edging Felicity was unplanned and completely unexpected. It twisted me with desire so hot, even if she wanted to have sex, I feared I'd be a two-pump chump.

“More.” she asked, pulling at my shoulders and directing my mouth against hers. “I need to feel you, Klaus.”

Her fingertips tickled down my spine and I arched like a lion welcoming the morning sun. Felicity wasn't short by any means, but I was still taller than her by easily five inches. Yet her arms felt impossibly long as they made a sensual map of the muscles on my back.

“Are you sure, Felicity?” I asked, already on my knees. “You look at me with that hunger in your eyes, but I can take myself in hand and finish that way.”

I worked my cock a few pumps to show her the truth in my words. She spread her thighs in welcome, and the invitation snapped the last thread of my control. I hadn't lied when I told her I'd not had sex since my ex-wife. Six long years in the desert. I feared I wouldn't last long. It may have been why I

edged her so hard, so she'd be so drunk on dopamine she'd forget I barely lasted long enough for her to even realize my cock was in her.

I pressed my fingers into her heat, massaging her clit with my thumb.

“You're still fluttering.”

My cock howled at the extra minutes it wasn't getting to experience what my fingers felt.

“Klaus.” She whined, “Not like that. I want you.”

“You want my cock?” I asked her, loving the pink shade that rose from her neck to her cheeks. “If you want it, tell me. Say it Felicity.”

She licked her lips, and my cock twitched in response. A goal for some other night when I had a stronger hold on my staying power. I watched her battle with propriety and my request and seeing it wage in her eyes poked hot shards of desire down my spine and into my balls.

“Please Klaus,” she lifted her eyes to meet my gaze, “give me your cock.”

“Bare. Give me your cock bare.” I corrected.

I don't know why I needed her to be so specific. Maybe because it turned me on. Perhaps I wanted to ensure one last time that she understood we were about to be intimate on a completely different level than a typical one-night stand.

“Give me your bare cock, Klaus.” She asked a second time. “Please.”

It felt like I fell into her, my cock homing in on its target with laser efficiency. I canted my hips, hoping to caress her g-spot with my first few pushes into her seductive heat. I tried to remain tethered to conscious thought. To remember that I wanted her to be mindless with pleasure as well. My body begged me to submit to the desperate need to fuck and claim. It was exhausting trying to fight against the primal desire to wildly hump like a starved beast.

Her insides kissed and sucked at me with each press and retreat. Felicity's sighs became a musical map to all the places inside of her she wanted to be touched. I held that focus, keeping a tight rein on the rapture pounding at the door, begging me to set it free.

“Felicity, you are too fucking perfect.”

I told her, pressing my hips against her, attempting to fill her with every centimeter of my length. No matter how hard I pressed, my body demanded more. It told me I needed to press in more, try harder, push deeper.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?”

I asked her, running my fingers through her slit before collecting her thighs and cradling them in my arms. Gone were her soft kisses and sweet sighs. She kissed me like she wanted to swallow me whole. Hungrily demanding more with each fusing of our lips or swipe of tongue. Her animalistic need clearly demanded action, not flowery words. I gave her exactly what she needed. I rut into her with purpose, reaching between us to manipulate her clit while I doggedly pursued the promise of my pleasure just over the horizon.

“You better give me that come you’re holding onto.” I told her. “I don’t know how much more self-control I have, princess. You stole it all from me and I need to come.”

“I’m there.” She told me, “It’s right—”

On a scream that I was certain would have the neighbors calling the police, she unraveled into glorious rapture. I tried to watch. To drink in every moment, of her fall into bliss. The magnetic pull of her orgasm was too much to resist. Feeling her tighten around me while also watching her beautiful face relax with pleasure I provided to her, threw me mercilessly over the edge and into the darkness of satisfaction.

NINETEEN



NEITHER OF US could bother with clean up. We didn't wake until late mid-morning, still sticky from the previous evening's activities. Though cleanup was definitely an exploration in mutually beneficial pleasure.

When Klaus appeared back in my bedroom dressed in a pair of jeans and a festive sweater, I realized I never even asked if he wanted to join me at my parent's house.

"Thank you for coming with me." I whispered, laying my head against his bicep while he locked the front door.

"I wouldn't have even considered letting you go alone. Not just because of how last night ended, but because I couldn't imagine selfishly soaking up every second while you're here."

And there it was again. The reminder that this was temporary. That soon the magic of the season would get tucked away again in boxes and bins for another year. We'd go back to the grind of our busy lives, and more than likely this would fade into a memory.

My dumb heart already planted a seed of hope. One that suggested things like long distance, and flying home more

frequently. I had oodles of vacation time saved up I rarely used. Now I'd have the perfect excuse.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked as we pulled onto the expressway. “You mentioned to Rex last night that you co-signed a lease for the woman.”

“Her name was Tracy.”

“Okay, you co-signed a lease for Tracy. But why not just give her the Airbnb? Wouldn't that have made more sense?”

He ran his hand down his mouth, leaving it covering his lips for long moments while I watched him contemplate my question.

“I considered it on more than one occasion. My parents' house is quite popular. Especially come spring and summer. Kids are really expensive, and my brother uses that rental income to supplement his own. With four kids, day care made little sense financially, so Heidi stays home and takes care of the administrative side of the property. I won't take that money away from my nephews and niece. It seemed more logical for me to just co-sign a lease for Tracy. That way, I could still help her out without taking away the income my brother and his family depend on.”

I'd never met anyone like him. He was too kind. To his own detriment and yet he persisted in kindness. That kind of selflessness wasn't something I'd witnessed before. It was a piece of him that made so much sense but also wound a string around my heart that I feared I'd be unable to cut away when the time came.

Bryce stood in the driveway as we pulled up. Hands in his pockets, hunched over, clearly protecting himself from the chill of the wind. I wondered, offhand, how long he'd stood out there.

When we'd finally come up for air after our second round in and out of the shower, I'd seen no less than fifty missed calls and text notifications from Sera, asking me to please call her as soon as I got the messages. I'd texted her we were on our way and I'd see her soon—I assumed that was how Bryce knew we were coming.

“If you're out here to confront her, Bryce, I'd suggest you rethink that.”

Klaus got out first, his hand extended protectively over the front of the car. I was out nearly the same time he was, and as soon as he heard my door close, he stalked over to me and stood a step in front of me, like he could block me from whatever unpleasantness he expected to witness.

“I'm not here to argue.” Bryce held his hands up in the air. “Quite the opposite. I wanted to talk to you, privately, so you didn't feel you had to act any kind of way for me.”

He looked over at Klaus with a question arching his eyebrow.

“Anything you have to say, you can say in front of Klaus.” Klaus slid his hand into mine as if to show Bryce we, in that moment, came as a package deal.

“I owe you a massive apology, Felicity. I'm embarrassed and ashamed that I didn't think. That's the explanation in its

most obvious and simple terms. If you would like to hear the long story of how this surprise came to fruition once we're inside, I'd be more than happy to share it with you. But my apology is about you, not about my blind stupidity forgetting someone so significant. It was never, ever, my intention to overshadow you, force you into a secondary position, or fail to celebrate how important you are to Sera and, by extent, to me as well. You deserve so much more than you got on your birthday, and I promise I will do everything I can to make up for that."

Klaus turned to me, eyebrows raised, as if in silent question if I planned to accept his apology.

"I appreciate that, Bryce. I know you didn't do it intentionally, but that doesn't make it hurt any less."

"What can I do to make it up to you?" He asked.

"Well, I hear there is this trip around the world that is pretty spectacular."

"How did I not expect that answer?" He laughed, pulling me into a hug. "It's so nice to finally meet you in person and hug you."

The three of us walked up the driveway, met with Rex standing sentry at the front door, hands in his pockets, staring down at the two men flanking my sides.

"Everything alright?" He asked.

"It is now." Bryce answered.

"I was asking my sister."

Rex had this look. One that said, though you may see my eyes, I'm looking right through you. He gave *that* look to Bryce. Which shocked the shit out of me. But I realized that if he was staring at the driveway from the door, the gesticulating hands might tell a different story from the words we'd all spoken in the driveway.

"Bryce wanted to clear the air from last night." I told Rex. "Thank you though, for breaking out big, bad, Rex as a reminder to these two that both Miller women come with their own personal protection."

"Klaus." Rex nodded at him as he passed into the house. "Merry Christmas."



"**I**n a strange convergence of kismet, my sister-in-law, Tillie—most of you know her as Raven of the *Bear and Raven Morning Show*, gave away a trip to Las Vegas over the summer to this lovely woman named Harlow. Whom some of you met yesterday. Harlow, Tillie learned, works for the Lyric Opera as a stage assistant."

"She's Lead Stage Manager, Bryce." Sera corrected. "It's a big difference. She calls all the shots on the production. It's a very hard position to come by."

"I'm sorry, Angel." He said to Sera before addressing the entire room once again, "Harlow is the Lead Stage Manager at the Lyric. Tillie mentioned this to me, knowing what we both know about Sera's classical training and the desire to share her

gorgeous voice with the world. I reached out to Harlow, who mentioned that *The Magical Flute* was their winter production, and they were in the last weeks of rehearsal. Knowing this kind of sign from the universe had to be acted on, I shot for the moon. Harlow is a magic maker and got it approved, and there you have it.”

“And who knows!” my mom chimed in, “Now that they’ve seen and heard how incredibly talented Sera is, maybe they’ll offer her a spot on their roster.”

“It doesn’t happen like that, Mom.” Sera rolled her eyes in my direction.

“You had me so worried last night,” Sera came and flopped next to me on the sofa, pulling me against her. “I thought you would hate me forever, and you’d fly back to New York and never talk to me again.”

“Meh—Bryce offered to buy me a cruise, so we’re good now.”

That earned me a balled up napkin lobbed in my direction.

“I wasn’t mad, Sera, I was hurt. And even if I had been mad, I can’t ever stay mad at you.”

She yanked me into a hug that nearly cut off my air supply, covering me in her relieved tears.

“Where’s Regina?” I asked Rex, finally noticing her absence.

“She flew back home this morning. There are a lot of details that need to get sorted out, and she felt it was best to get a head start.”

“On Christmas?” Sera asked, wrinkling her nose. “Who works on Christmas?”

“Lots of people.” Klaus said, “Gas station workers, police officers, nurses and doctors, firemen, EMTs, crisis line workers, the list goes on and on. The world doesn’t stop for a holiday, unfortunately.”

“No, I knew *that*.” She said, “But she’s like in business. Owns a company or something—so why would *she* need to work on Christmas. Shouldn’t she be with her family?”

“Not everyone has a Norman Rockwell existence, Pidge. You’d be wise to remember that everyone has demons their fighting.”

Rex pinned her with the same snappy assed look he’d given me the night before.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I have to ask. What is with the Pidge and the Pudge? Your sisters are thirty-six-year-old women.”

“It’s okay Klaus.” I held out my hand, so he’d come sit next to me on the couch. “They’re nicknames from when we were kids. Don’t you have a nickname for your brother?”

“Leo is his nickname. Just like Klaus is mine.”

“Pidge and Pudge was a story of these little elves.” My mom explained. “I’m sure the book is still lying around here somewhere. Anyhow, when the girls were little, it was their favorite book and Rex would read it for them nonstop. He was the only one they’d ever accept it being read by, actually. He did voices for each of the elves and the girls just ate it up.”

“I literally don’t remember this story.” I told Sera, “Do you?”

“Nope. Had no clue it was a story. Honestly, didn’t even remember the origins of the nicknames, only that he’d been using them forever.”

“Are you sure there was a story, Mom?” I asked. “Rex, do you remember reading to us? No offense, but I can’t picture you, with a set of twins under each arm, reading to us. Most of the time, you were telling us to get out of your room and begging Mom to keep us away from you and your friends.”

“Not only do I remember reading you the story, I bet if I sat and thought long enough, I could probably recite it line for line.” His focus was somewhere off in the distance, as if watching a movie of the three of us as kids, a soft smile on his lips. “And I never meant to offend either of you with the nicknames. If I offended either you, and not your boyfriends, I’ll stop.”

“Boyfriends?” Sera asked, “Felicity literally just met Klaus like two days ago. Maybe you should pump the brakes on the labels, Rex.”

She turned to me and saw the very obvious blush I felt burning my face, and Sera immediately knew what it meant.

Sera: Felicity Cherubim you better give me the details ☐☐

Me: IDK what you're talking about
☐☐♀😊

Sera: LIES ☐☐☐

Sera: Your face doesn't lie. You took
that pony for a ride. I know you did.
☐☐☐

Me: Santa Claus said I was a very
good girl this year 😊☐☐

Sera: 😳



“Now remember, this is for your birthday *and* Christmas.
Don't be expecting anything else from me, you hear?”

I pointed at Sera's gift, making a joke about the exact statement we heard far too many times growing up. I knew sentimentality won out over the cost every day of the week. I had a friend who created paintings from pictures. She painted their first kiss based on a grainy video from an Instagram page, *The Thrifty Cruiser*. The Instagrammer had been the only witness that documented it. And you could tell by how Sera's eyes were all glassy and unfocused, and the bliss on Bryce's face that the chemistry between them had been there from that moment.

I'd actually been really worried that the low quality of the video would prevent my friend from being able to capture it, but the painting was out of this world. I was obsessed with it, and it wasn't even me in the picture.

"Holy shit." Sera held it up, running her fingers over their faces. "How did you do this?"

I heard the tears in her voice as she passed the painting over to Bryce so he could look at it as well.

"It's beautiful, Felicity. I'm speechless."

She threw herself at me, yanking me into a hug, and refusing to let go.

"It's perfect. Absolutely perfect. I love you so much A." she told me.

"To infinity plus one, B." I told her.

"This, too, is for your birthday *and* Christmas... so don't be expecting anything more from me, either. You ungrateful kids need to learn the meaning of a hard-earned dollar." She joked, passing me her gift.

"No one ever called you ungrateful. And we always made sure you got birthday presents and gifts from Santa." My mom interjected, clearly offended by our joking.

"Um, Grandpa called us ungrateful." I told her. "On our I think seventh birthday? Was that the year of the *Home Alone* Walkie Talkies?"

"I think so." Sera confirmed. "Instead of the Talkboy ones, from *Home Alone* he got us some other version—I can't

remember, Barbie ones maybe? And Felicity mentioned that the kids at school had the blue ones with stealth recording mode and auto replay. Grandpa got all in his feelings that we insulted his gift.”

“How is it you can remember that, but you can’t remember a book I read to you two ten million times?” Rex laughed.

I had no explanation for it. But thankfully, Bryce saved me. He walked into our living room with a glowing cake in his hands.

“A little birdie might have mentioned that this is your favorite.”

The Twix and caramel ice cream cake glowed with a 36 and said just one thing: Happy Birthday Felicity.

“It’s Christmas Day. How did you buy a birthday cake on Christmas day?” I asked as they sang.

“He didn’t buy it.” Sera answered after I blew out my candles. “He went to the 7-11 down the street and got all the stuff needed to make you one.”

Of all the gestures of apology he could have made, I don’t think I was prepared to be showered in the piercing visibility of being so clearly seen by Bryce Ellis. Damn. That fucker won my heart, too.

“Tickets to the API Documentary Film Festival? Are you insane Seraphim Claire!?”

“It’s a sister’s bonding trip. Me and you, and a weekend in Washington D.C. while you nerd out to your heart’s content on the films that make me bawl my eyes out.”

“Says the woman who out-nerded the *Lord of the Rings* tour guide in New Zealand.” Bryce quipped from behind her.

“Don’t get me started, Ellis.” She laughed. “And this is an A & B conversation.”

“C yourself out,” I giggled at our old juvenile joke.

Once the birthday portion of our celebrations concluded, Christmas commenced in a flurry of presents being passed back and forth between family members and the excited oohs and ah’s of one another’s thoughtfulness.

“I’m sorry. I have nothing for you to open.” I turned to Klaus, squeezing his hand. “I hate that you are left out.”

“Princess, you gave me the best Christmas present I think I will ever receive last night.” He whispered directly in my ear, the subtle timbre of his voice sending a shiver down my spine.

“I knew it.” Sera slapped my calf, seated on the floor next to me. “You little liar.”

“I didn’t lie.”

The rest of my family chattered about the fancy countertop air fryer /convection oven Rex bought my mom.

“I told you Santa Claus told me I was a very good girl. It’s fucking Christmas and his name is Klaus. What other massive runaway of a clue do you need to put two and two together?”

“Holy shit.” She squeaked, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

“Sorry,” she said to our family, “Felicity knows something about a Kardashian. I know none of you care. Carry on with

your Christmas chatter.”

TWENTY



WATCHING Felicity and her family wrapped my heart in a tenderness I hadn't expected to feel. Obviously, I was a stranger looking in, but Rex and Bryce pulled me into their orbit and treated me as if we'd been friends for months, not minutes. Perhaps because Rex and Bryce were practical strangers as well, it kind of just worked.

Felicity and her sister were so similar. Their personalities differed, that was obvious, but their mannerisms, their quick, quippy wit, the way they threw their heads back when they laughed, and quirked their lips when they smiled. It was as if I experienced Felicity in stereo. I found myself not wanting to miss a second of it. Since our intimate night, I wanted to gorge on every piece of Felicity I could, to ensure I experienced as much of her presence while she was here.

Every minute that ticked by seemed like a reminder of the slippery passage of time that tortured me, knowing that we would soon be back to boring pumpkins living in completely different states. For all I knew, she was okay with that. But for me, I didn't know if I could go back to being the *me* I was three days ago. Despite the short time being with her, I liked

how I felt when we were together. When she looked at me and smiled, I felt complete again. That was something I hadn't felt in years.

Having someone like Felicity take an interest in me exposed the hole I didn't realize was there. Her interest in my thoughts on so many subjects showed me what my life had been lacking. Six years is a long time to have cut myself off from that kind of connection. It happened too easily. To just disconnect from the world like I had. But Felicity opened a door to a room full of warmth I was reluctant to leave. I didn't think I could return to the cold desolation of my own making.

"Felicity goes home in a week, right?" Rex asked me, handing me a cup of coffee.

"Yeah." I answered, oddly thrown that he seemed to read my thoughts, given I'd just been reflecting on that.

"Any idea what the two of you are going to do? By the looks of it, the both of you seem pretty smitten."

"I honestly don't know. I hope that there's something beyond this. I still have one more year before I hit eighty points. Until then I'm cemented in Illinois. And Felicity loves what she does. She needs to be in New York in order to thrive with her career. From my understanding of television, New York is it. It's numero uno. For her to come to Chicago would be a step backward, not forward."

"For someone who doesn't know, you certainly have thought about it a lot." Rex elbowed me with a smile.

“I never would have believed the instant fall for someone existed. I feel like it has flipped my world on its head. I just don’t know if it’s we will actually work. It’s just so outlandish, you know?”

Having him to talk to comforted me. He listened and didn’t judge. I’d expected as her older brother, he would have.

“Do me a favor, okay? No matter what happens. Whether it’s next week, or months down the road. Don’t ghost her. Be upfront. Whatever path the two of you end up taking, don’t let her spin scenarios in her head again about why it didn’t work out. She’s battled back from a place where she heaped all of this ridiculous blame on herself. She is just finally peeking back out again as the Felicity she used to be. Just be careful with her.”



“No!” Sera pushed Felicity’s hand away from the discard pile. “You just put down a Draw Four. I draw four cards, which is my turn, and then it goes to Rex. You don’t get to make me draw cards indefinitely!”

“That’s how we always played as kids.” Felicity shot back, trying to force a second card on the pile.

“I knew this is what a Miller Christmas would look like,” Bryce said to me. “On our cruise, I would sit out on our balcony, close my eyes, and imagine what it would be like to be here in this house with the two of them. Well, and Rex, but

I assumed you wouldn't be nearly as competitive as the two of them with this game."

"That's because when you're playing two player it would come back to you. But we're playing with five. So pull back there sparky." Sera tossed the card back near Felicity's hands.

Watching Sera get so worked up over a game of Uno tickled the hell out of me. Especially because Felicity was no better. You'd think we were playing for money based on how viciously they fought for every card and discard. I winked at Felicity and placed a reverse on the pile.

"Bryce doesn't think I'm competitive Sera." Rex peeked over his cards at all of us. "It's unfortunate that you'll have to bear the brunt of your boyfriend's mistake."

He laid another draw four on the table, to Sera's apoplectic calls of cheating and challenging his color change. He showed her he, in fact, had no yellow cards to speak of, so she had to draw four more cards for the challenge. With eight more cards in her hand, the turn went back to Felicity, and back to Bryce, who laid down a reverse. His only yellow card, he insisted.

"Aw, such a shame." Felicity sung, laying a draw two down and forcing Sera to pick up more cards. "Uno."

"You're just letting her win because you feel bad about yesterday."

She cried, helplessly trying to find her best card option, as if that would ensure Felicity wouldn't win. Sera changed the color to green, which Rex played through, sending it back to

me. I looked over at Felicity and laid down another reverse card, sending it back to Rex again.

I'd never thought that playing cards could be foreplay, but the heated look in Felicity's gaze told me I was in for an amazing reward when we arrived back home. *Home*. That thought felt too good to correct my heart from indulging in a fantasy.

"Oh, come on! This is bullshit."

Sera yelled, throwing her hands up in the air, amid cackles from the rest of us as Rex threw down a skip. Felicity placed her last card on the pile, a green seven. The table erupted into uncontrollable fits of laughter as Sera accused us all of cheating, conspiring, and passing secret codes to one another.

"Maybe you all shouldn't play these kinds of games if they're going to get so heated," Mrs. Miller suggested from the sofa where she and her husband watched *Meet Me in St. Louis*. "No name calling or shouting on Christmas."

"It's not our fault you raised a sore loser, Mom. Maybe it's an opportunity for Sera to learn how to lose with grace." Rex said, trying valiantly to keep it together.

"Admit it!" Sera continued. "I know you were passing messages back and forth to each other. How else did you all know what color her last card was?"

"I promise." I told her, holding up my hands. "We're laughing because you are taking this so seriously. There was no cheating, no conspiring, or secret coding. Cross my heart."

The card game broke up, but it appeared no one wanted to break the genial warmth of spending time together. Not that I was complaining. Being welcomed into the fold of the Miller family wasn't something I wanted to let go of just yet, either. We all gathered our various drinks and found seats in the living room to watch the tail end of the movie.

The most surprising moment of all was when *Felicity* joined her sister in singing *Have Yourself a Merry Christmas*. Sera harmonized around Felicity's melody. It was beautiful, and totally unexpected.

"I didn't know you sang." I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, resting my head against hers.

"Both of them have the most angelic voices." Their mom told me. "But you get her in front of people, and she just clams up. It was actually how the girls started voice lessons to begin with. Sister Joyce, their children's chorus leader in grade school, kept telling me what beautiful voices they had. Every time I asked them to sing, they'd zip their lips and shake their heads no. Sister Joyce suggested putting them in voice lessons to get over their performance anxiety. This one," she pointed at Sera with a chagrined smile, "took to it like a fish does water. But Felicity would cry so hard every Tuesday I just couldn't force her to do it anymore."

"Remember our voice coach in High School?" Sera asked. "God, she was awful. Talk about crushing someone's spirit. Felicity wanted to be part of honor choir with me, but in order to do it you had to audition. And despite having the voice, Felicity would fall apart in the audition. And Mrs. K. every

year would work with her in voice lessons only to crush her after her audition year after year, telling her any number of things that boiled down to her not being good enough.”

“I forgot all about her.” Felicity said. “Man, fifteen years of repressed inadequacy suddenly appearing all at once.”

Despite the laugh that accompanied the statement, I knew it was a humorless laugh. It all strangely made sense. Her love of documentaries that highlighted people’s light said a lot about how she wanted to help people.

I had absolutely no right to lay claim to it, given we’d barely met. I felt personally responsible for holding her in the light, like she did for everyone else. To give her the security of feeling seen and celebrated for exactly who she was, without needing to change that.

TWENTY-ONE



“YOUR FAMILY IS REALLY GREAT.”

It had been hard saying goodbye to everyone tonight. Intellectually, I knew that everyone else was leaving for the night as well. Sera planned to join Bryce at his house, and they were going to drive Rex back to his hotel. But saying goodbye at the door still had been awfully hard. Even with plans to get together the following day for dinner and a movie. The invitations for Klaus to join had been immediate and enthusiastic, and it thrilled me that Rex and Bryce seemed to get along with Klaus so well.

“You men seem thick as thieves already.”

I told him, allowing him to help me up the stair to the front door. After two days in fuck me boots, I couldn't wait to kick around in nothing special the following day. As much as I loved heels and what they did for my posture, I also did not like how badly my feet hurt after wearing them.

“I have to admit, I'm pretty shocked that Rex was so nice to me today. I one hundred percent expected him to ice me out of any conversation after I stood up to him yesterday.”

“And again today.” I reminded him. “The nicknames never bothered Sera or me. He is the only one who’s ever used them, and never with malice.”

“That’s fine. But given you’re both adults, those words have significant connotations in relation to body image. Something you already have to fight against every single day working in such an image focused industry. Perhaps a temperature check would be smart.”

Charmed all the way to my toes. That’s how he made me feel, taking up a banner in my honor against any and all who sought to insult me. The cement I encased my heart in to ensure I wouldn’t catch feelings had too many chips in it already, and now another huge chunk broke free.

We barely made it in the door and I stumbled into an armchair, desperate to get my boots off.

“Here, let me.”

Klaus knelt in front of me, unzipping one, then the other, leaving a trail of kisses along my knees and lower thigh before standing and leading me to the sofa. He took my feet and placed them in his lap, working each together and individually. The overload of sensation had me groaning, squirming, and practically purring with satisfaction.

“Will you sing for me?” He asked, his fingers working their magic from my toes up to my thighs.

“I don’t sing.” I told him, trying to pull my feet out of his lap.

“No princess. The foot massage wasn’t conditional. I’ll gladly be your personal masseuse any time you need a little relief. But you sing so beautifully—and I only caught glimpses of it while you sang with Sera. I hoped you’d sing just for me.”

I shook my head. It was too big of an ask. Doing so would expose a piece of me which existed dangerously close to the very marrow of who I was. That was far too intimate for what we were.

“I won’t push.” He promised. “I know it takes time to build that kind of comfort. Maybe one day.”

One day. The casual way he suggested it. As if possibly, we could explore what we meant after the week ended.

“I see these.” He stuck his hand between my legs and ran his finger along my satin covered mound. “Every time you open your legs like that.”

I opened my legs wider in invitation, holding his hand in place and pressing against the place I throbbed for him. He manipulated me both on top of my panties and along the seams, teasing the sensitive skin of my lips while barely glancing against my clit.

“Is this what you want from me? To touch you here?”

“I definitely want more than just touching.” I told him, pushing myself into a seated position. “But I think you deserve a little of attention first.”

I fell to my knees in front of him. He helped me pull his zipper down, pressing his jeans over his hips and down his

legs, which I pushed all the way to the floor. I ran the flat of my palm up and down the ridge, rising against his boxer briefs, leaning in to trace him with my mouth.

“Take it out.” He told me.

His command would have to wait.

“Turnabout is fair play, Mr. Baer.”

I centered myself between his legs, looking up at him while I ran my tongue along the cotton.

“Please take this off.” He pinched my sweater, pulling it gently off my shoulders. “The bra too. I want to see all of you.”

I obliged, relishing the relief my palms provided to my aching nipples.

“Just like that. Keep doing it.”

He slid further down the sofa, digging beneath the elastic of his briefs and taking out his cock. The sensations were too overwhelming. Despite my closed eyes, I could still feel the heat of his stare all over my body.

“Do you know how seductive you are?” He asked, pulling my focus back to him. “Not just this beautiful body, or your charm and wit, but all the small things, too. The seemingly insignificant ones. Like how deeply you love your family, how free you are around them. Uninhibited. I love hearing you laugh. Watching you delight in shared secrets with your sister.”

He worked his cock with fervor. The corded muscles of his forearm stood out in sharp relief against his supple skin as he yanked and pinched. Even his voice sounded bunched with effort.

“You told her we fucked, didn’t you? Did you tell her how much you moaned and shook? How you begged me to let you come? Do you share dirty details with each other?”

I wrapped my hand around his, helping him work his cock.

“Open.” He told me.

The moment I did, he pressed his tip between my lips, caressing the back of my neck as he dipped inside my mouth.

“Yes.” He hissed, gently pushing into my mouth. “So good, princess.”

He tickled down my throat, and back up through my hairline while I focused on bringing him as much pleasure as he’d given me. Now it was he whose soft grunts spurred me on. The feel of him lifting his hips, trying to get deeper but pulling back before he gagged me, had me desperate to relax my throat to give him the pleasure he sought. It was heady. The power of knowing how badly someone wanted you and knowing what you did brought them pleasure.

“Enough. Please, enough. Climb up here.” He begged. “I need to see you. To feel you skin to skin.”

I shucked off my skirt and underwear, straddling over his hips.

“This is quickly becoming my favorite place to be.” He whispered against my lips as he split me open. “I don’t know

if I will ever be able to get enough of it.”

I didn't know if I would either.

TWENTY-TWO



EACH DAY that we woke up, I felt as if some great celestial clock gonged to remind me of the ever-quickening progression toward the end of our time together. We'd spent blissful days hanging out with Sera and Bryce, visiting all the typical haunts and introducing Bryce to little known parts of the city. Rex would try to be present as often as possible, working throughout the week on this project he'd mentioned with Regina.

"I wonder if they're dating." Felicity asked while getting ready in the bathroom. "I mean I feel like I would *know* because like I said, I live with him. But, it seems so strange that he'd bring her to Christmas Eve, then suddenly she leaves Christmas Day, but now four days later, she's back in Chicago again?"

The whole family planned to spend an evening in the city, walking the State Street Marshall Field display before having dinner in the famed Walnut Room. A Miller family tradition from year's past, I'd been told. Technically Macy's purchased Marshall Fields a long time ago, but as lifelong Chicagoans most still refer to the landmark store by its original name.

Felicity and Sera spent the previous evening posing the same questions when Rex mentioned she was going to join us tonight. Witnessing their friendship up close provided me so much insight into who Felicity was as a person. She told me she was older by eleven minutes. However, Sera deferred to her opinion and expertise on many things. As if she truly was the older sister. Felicity took on the role of Sera's cheerleader. Even in the smallest things, like helping her decide what ornament to buy at the Christmas Market. Sera held Felicity's opinion the highest of all her family.

When they shared inside jokes, they would tilt their heads together. If you were joking around with them and they sat or stood side by side, each mimicked the other's reaction even if they weren't looking at one another. And the cutest of all, they had their own language that they truly believed no one else understood. Spoiler alert—Bryce, Rex and I all knew exactly what they were saying, though their mom continued to be confounded by it.

“So, what's going to happen when you go back to New York?” I heard Felicity's dad ask her as we moved from one window to the next.

“I'm trying not to think about it.” She told him. “I just want to live in the moment for now. I'm trying to forget that dangling ball with the flashing sign counting us into the new year is also counting down going home. Needing to figure out what Klaus and I will do is just too much for me to handle right now.”

“Would it be so bad to come back home to us? It’s been so wonderful having all three of you back here again.”

“Is Rex making a move to Chicago I don’t know about?” She playfully punched his arm, laughing as they walked a few steps ahead.

“He owns his company.” Her dad shrugged. “Maybe if two out of three birds were back near the nest, he’d decide he wanted to be closer too.”

“I need to be in New York.” She said. “Unfortunately, that’s where the jobs are.”

“Have you guys talked about it?” Bryce fell into step next to me.

“No. I think we both just kind of silently agreed to enjoy the week and deal with the future when we arrive there.”

“As someone who just went through the same thing with the other Miller twin, it won’t work. If you are falling for Felicity as hard as I did for Sera, hoping fate will decide for you is just going to cause a lot of unnecessary heartache. One of you will have to decide at some point what is more important, the job you have or the person you love.”

“Respectfully, Bryce, we’ve known each other for a week. That is not a declaration anywhere in the stratosphere of our existence right now.”

“Understood.” He said. “But, if you’re at the point in your life where you know what you want and what you don’t—I’d say have the conversations sooner rather than later and save yourself some emotional turmoil.”

“What are you two going on about?” Sera skip jogged to catch up with us.

“Nothing of importance.” He ran his hand down her cheek and kissed her softly. “I said that Miller women are far too easy to love. And it swoops in when you least expect it.”

TWENTY-THREE



I'D BEEN SO WRAPPED up in my dad's conversation, I barely noticed Bryce next to me. He joined me as I walked into the store and up the escalator. Given the long wait to eat at the Walnut Room, I'd volunteered to do a status check.

"I wanted a chance to talk to you alone." He said.

There it was, the exact conversation I'd been expecting all week. When I came to Chicago, I braced for this moment. Dreaded it, even. But the more time I spent with Bryce, the dread morphed to joy and excitement.

"Shouldn't you be asking my dad?" I ribbed him. "Or Rex even?"

"Well, to be honest, Felicity, your opinion is the only one I care about."

Bryce delivered the statement with such fervor, the weight of his words glued me in place. Never mind that our place in line moved up four paces, and we were nearing the hostess stand. That he held me in such high regard? It touched me deep in my marrow.

“Not only are you Sera’s best friend and older sister, but mine too. I feel a kinship toward you, ever since our first FaceTime on the cruise. Helping you through the early days of Xander’s infidelity also showed me a path over the last hurdles of my heartache. And that’s something I won’t ever forget. I feel responsible and protective of your happiness and well-being in a way I’ve ever experienced before. Similar to how I want the world for Sera, but different in that I know how fragile everything seems right now. Being in your shoes a year ago, I can empathize with the position I’m putting you in.”

He wiped away my tears before pulling me in for a hug.

“Bottom line, while of course I respect your brother and Dad, I’d marry Sera regardless of what they thought about me. I know your opinion is the only one Sera cares about. If you are in a place where this would be too painful for you, I’ll hold off. I know beyond any doubt that Sera will want to pore over every detail and idea with you. The last thing I want is for you to have to force a smile for her and feel you need to hide away and suffer in silence because you don’t want to encroach on her excitement. If you need more time, just say the word and I’ll wait.”

If someone came to me when we were kids and asked me to list the qualities that would be Sera’s perfect match, I wouldn’t have ever come close to Bryce Ellis. As I stood there, staring into an infinite forest of compassion in his eyes, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he was exactly who Sera was supposed to marry. No question. And even if I was on the floor writhing in pain, I don’t think I could ever stand in the

way, even for a second, of their happiness. No matter if I was still working through my heartbreak.

“Bryce, in a million years, I would never make you wait because of my personal problems. That would be the height of selfishness.”

“No. It’s called self-care. It’s called giving yourself grace, Felicity. And on a personal level, the two of you practically share a soul you’re so in tune with one another. If she senses your sadness, she’ll dim her light to protect you from heartache. I don’t want Sera to have to dim her light to make others feel comfortable. She is phosphorescent. I will make sure she is so every day of our lives together.”

His words softened my jagged pieces. The love he had for my twin gave me hope for my own loosely glued back together heart. And of course, there was Klaus. Klaus, who I’d spent the week with and saw a possibility of what life after Xander could look like.

“Bryce, I don’t know what you need from me. My blessing? My assurance. Whatever it is, you have it. Ask her. I promise, sadness is the furthest emotion I feel knowing that my first best friend has found her forever best friend.”

“Name please?” The hostess asked.

“Miller, party of eight. I’m just wondering how many people are ahead of us still.”

“We’ll be seating you in about ten minutes if you can gather your party.”

I shot off a text to everyone to head inside.

“So I’m going to need your help with my proposal.” He told me with a wink.



“**W**hat is it you do, Klaus?” My dad asked while the waitress took our drink orders.

“I work for the state.” He said, “I’m a case evaluator for the 3-3-3 crisis line.”

“Oh god, that has got to be so hard.” Regina reached across the table and touched his hand, before realizing what she’d done and pulling back.

“Some days for sure. But it’s also fulfilling. I provide hope when people fear they have no one left to turn to. I just wish there was a simplified way of knowing exactly what help was available delivered to them in something seamless.”

“Now that’s an idea.” Rex turned to Regina. “I wonder if there is a way to create needs-based evaluation into an AI and have it interface with both state systems and private aid, to spit out a list of options.”

“You all just spoke gibberish.” Sera laughed. “How do you know so much tech language anyway, Rex? I thought you wrote psychological evaluations?”

“And those evaluations are delivered how, do you think?” He asked, smiling into his wineglass, “Both Regina and I perform similar functions, and she and I both utilize AI—artificial intelligence—to evaluate each response and deliver

follow-up questions based on those responses. It's all computer code."

"I've been living with you for seven months, and literally did not know that's what your company did."

"What did you think I did?" He asked.

"Wrote tests. You know, like SAT style."

"It's a bit more complex than that."

"Dr. Miller is a trailblazer in psychometric testing, which is what we do." Regina explained. Neither Sera nor I missed the adoration in her voice. "People from all over the country look to him for advice."

"It's so weird hearing people call you by your formal title. I don't think I'll ever get used to it. Not that shouldn't be. But you're my brother, Rex. The guy who will walk three city blocks to get me coffee from Bluestone because you know how much I love their Magic White. But also yell at me when I leave my laundry in the dryer longer than five seconds."

"Or three days." He rose his eyebrow at me with a smirk.

"He sounds like a pretty awesome big brother." Regina knocked shoulders with him, winking at me.

"The greatest."



We tried to avoid the topic the whole day. New Year's Eve. My last night. I flew home mid-morning on New Year's Day. Though Rex apparently had access to a private jet

somehow and told me if I wanted to stay longer, I could always ride back with him. That was too tempting. But delaying ripping off the band aid didn't change its presence. Eventually, I'd feel the sting, so there was no point in delaying it by a day or two.

"I'd like to try." I told Klaus on our way to my parents' house.

None of us were huge party people and agreed a quiet night in playing board games and having dinner together was the best way to spend our last night together.

"New York isn't too far, right? It's only a two-hour flight. And my whole family lives here, so it's not like I won't be back. Especially once Bryce proposes. I feel like I'll be flying home constantly for dress fittings and venue visits, and all the other things that go along with planning a wedding."

Klaus put his hand on my thigh, rubbing the most soothing circular patterns. I knew why we'd avoided this topic until now. Just voicing it, putting myself out there waiting for his rejection, was scary, and it hurt preparing for the worst. I should have waited until *after* Bryce proposed to bring it up.

"Are you sure, Felicity? I'm never going to be the six-figure guy. I don't know the difference between deck shoes and boat shoes. Bryce's suave, effortlessly put together look, or the classically elegant one your brother pulls off so well, is beyond my pay grade and skill set. I'm just me. Comfortable t-shirts, relaxed fit jeans, sometimes a sweater—but always firmly middle class in the most typical ways. I make sixty-five thousand dollars a year, and other than a cost-of-living

increase, I've maxed out my potential increases. You more than likely make double what I do. I'm totally okay with who I am, princess, but if you really want to make a go of this, you need to be okay with that as well."

I opened my mouth to reply, but he leaned over and pulled me against his mouth for a kiss real fast while the light was red.

"You don't need to answer now. But think about it."

Think about it, I did. As time wound slowly toward midnight. Each time Klaus made some sarcastic quip that had the table breaking into giggles, or he took my hand under the table, brought me a drink, a napkin, or a snack, I thought about it even more. I'd jokingly called the universe and ordered my perfect man. Someone who was kind, who didn't care about how much money he made. That's exactly what I got.

"Oh my god." I looked at Sera, shocked by what realization I had just arrived at.

"What?" she asked, looking panicked.

"Sera, I need you to come upstairs with me. I remembered something in our bedroom that we need to find right now."

I practically yanked her up the stairs into what used to be our bedroom. It looked completely different from what it had been when we were kids. The queen-sized bed, the new furnishings, the lack of cloud wallpaper, all distracting me from why I originally pulled her up here.

"Felicity, you're freaking me out. You look like you've seen a ghost."

“Sera, remember the first day I called, and you were talking about all this universe mumbo jumbo and I jokingly asked the universe to deliver me my idea of a perfect man?”

She nodded, “Yup. Financially stable. Cares more about being a good person than a rich one, won’t cheat on you, wants to go in search of your pearl, doesn’t come before you, intelligent conversationalist. That was all of them, right?”

I didn’t believe it. No fucking way. My brain was holding desperately onto any thread to convince myself that a long-distance relationship would work.

“Klaus works for the state.” I told her.

“Financially stable.” She answered. “And obviously cares more about being a good person than a rich one—hello, crisis line for shit wages.”

“He and I have had the most insane, esoteric conversations that lit every synapse in my brain into hyper-drive.”

“Holds intelligent conversations, check,” Sera confirmed with glee.

“And lord that man... best oral I’ve ever experienced.”

“File that under things I never needed to know about my sister and her boyfriend—check.” She showed me with her fingers all the boxes that he checked. “Every single one, Felicity. Every.single.one. I told you! The universe wanted you here for exactly this reason.”

She jumped up and down, yanking me into a hug and practically screaming in my ear.

“You need to tell that man!” she said. “You need to march down there and tell him fuck the doubts, throw caution right out on his damn head. He is your special delivery from the universe. Your very own Santa Claus for Christmas.



“I know all of you know how competitive Sera is when playing card games.” Bryce told the table. “Previous game notwithstanding,” he laughed, playing his Uno card into the pile.

“You know... I still would like my complaint to be logged on file. That loss should have an asterisk next to it.” Sera interrupted from where she sat at the head of the table.

I told Bryce this would never work. She was incapable of not talking shit for five minutes. Even with a presorted deck of cards that we’d played out via text for the last twenty-four hours to make sure it went just right.

“I learned this by observing my Angel in twenty-eight million iterations of card games during our trip.” He continued talking as if she had said nothing at all. “She hates losing. Hates it. But she is a graceful loser... most of the time.”

He winked at her from across the table, blowing her a kiss.

“How about a little less talking and a little more playing, Ellis? What are we, a retirement community? Jesus, it’s like the nurse just disbursed the night meds.”

“Not being the victor eats her up.”

He kept the same pace. Each of us playing our part silently as he continued. Though I was trying valiantly not to cry while I concentrated on placing my cards in the pile and listening to what he said.

“Because she’s passion. She’s fire. Everything that Sera does, she throws her whole heart into. Even things she’s afraid of—like taking helicopter rides across the New Zealand countryside or careening down the Matterhorn in an alpine slide.”

It was coming. He intentionally hadn’t called Uno, and I prayed she didn’t notice and spoil this thing. She typically watched that like a hawk because she loved nothing more than calling out an opponent and forcing them to draw cards. I swear if she did, I’d tackle her ass to the ground and duct tape her damn mouth shut.

“Being the recipient of her passion?” He said, holding up his card. “I feel like I’ve already won.”

He set the card down, winning the game. I wasn’t sure if his speech captivated so much she didn’t realize he won, or if she even paid attention to it. Thank god we could all stop miming like we gave a shit what cards we had in our pile too and actually be spectators.

“I thought about all the ways I could ask you to spend the rest of your life with me, Seraphim Claire. I’ve struggled with how to accurately tell you how much you mean to me. That my life wouldn’t be nearly as exciting or fulfilling without you by my side. Having you bear witness to my failed plans on our trip, I wanted this to be *better* so that you never had to feel

slighted or less than. But after sitting and thinking about all the grandiose ways I could ask, I realized that here, surrounded by all the people you love, on a quiet New Year's Eve, exactly one year from our first... *date*..." He winked, and she blushed clear up to her hairline. "There isn't a better, flashier way to tell you, my forever sunshine, that I never want to spend another day without you. Please do me the honor of becoming my wife."

I couldn't even see the ring. My whole damn face sprung a leak. Multiple leaks. Shit, I was a living example of Klaus' busted ass house and his frozen pipes.

Sera launched across the table and into his lap, sobbing into his neck as he held her.

"I love you so much Bryce." She wiped away the tears as they fell, kissing him between sobs. "Of course, I'll marry you. There's nothing I want more."

"So you never forget that you are my sunshine." He said, pulling a canary yellow diamond ring out of a Graff box.

Damn. Ellis went all out. The melee began, with the two of them surrounded by the entire family extending their congratulations. Bryce looked at me a few times with concern furrowing his brow. I held up my champagne glass and shook my head, hoping he understood I was ebullient with joy for both of them.

"God, their happiness is contagious, isn't it?" Klaus came up beside me and pulled me in for a kiss.

"It really is."

“Dance with me?”

He asked, pulling me toward the television that quietly played Christmas music from one of those background noise channels. I melted against his chest, humming along to the music, relishing in the feeling of being held by someone with whom I’d become deeply fond of.

“You are like no one I’ve ever met, Felicity. You have truly knocked on a busted out, broken-down shack full of cobwebs, and breathed new life into it. I feel—awake. That sounds strange, but I feel like for the first time in ages I’m operating with all of my senses again. Relishing in the simple goodness that surrounds us instead of just going through the motions. I don’t want to lose this... us. We just started exploring, and I can’t lose that before it’s really even begun.”

“Me neither, Klaus.”

As the clock counted down the last moments of the year, Klaus kissed me as if my soul needed that connection to live. I felt too much emotion in that kiss. Hope and fear, worry and confidence. But most of all, I felt the first blossoming kernels of love.

“So, did I impress the European judges?” Bryce asked Sera as we lazed around the fire, delaying the moment of our last goodbyes. “I personally believe this was a *flawless* execution.”

Clearly it was an inside joke between the two of them, because Sera burst into a fit of giggles, burying her face in his neck.

“Earl Ellis, the European judges are in awe of your technical execution. However, the American judges thought you probably shouldn’t have gone and beaten your soon-to-be wife in Uno while simultaneously talking about what a sore loser she is, and also asking her to marry you. You know... that whole *happy wife, happy life* thing.”

“I promise,” He snuggled her cheek, clearly unable to resist kissing her, “I’ll spend every day ensuring that you know how important you are to me, my angel.”

TWENTY-FOUR



THE WALK up the sidewalk to my parent's house felt like the last steps toward the executioner's chair. I couldn't help but think it was the last time she and I would walk through that door together. The last time we'd hold hands, and kiss just inside the door, and probably the last time she'd shyly ask me if I wanted to sleep over in her room.

When we started this brief interlude, we knew the days would keep rolling on, regardless of if we ignored them. Yet, here we were, facing an ending neither one of us wanted to see.

"Come to bed." She pulled me inside, bee-lining for the master bedroom. "I don't want to play games tonight. I just need to feel you, to be with you. One last time until we can figure this whole thing out."

One last time. I hated those words. They felt final. Like the end. As if, despite all of our promises of making this work, she'd already decided it was impossible.

"Felicity, I don't want to do this if you really think this is the end. Tell me you really want to figure out how we'll work out, and I'll lay you out and make love to you until the sun

comes up. But don't lie with pretty words just to avoid saying something and delaying it for down the road."

"Klaus, I need you. I felt it earlier in your kiss. All the same emotions that I'm feeling. I need you on top of me, and in me, surrounding me. I need to smell you, and listen to your panted breaths, to feel the electricity that takes away all other thoughts so I can see through all the doubts. Because I want a future with you, Klaus. I want it so badly, I'm afraid that I'm going to crush it into oblivion with how tightly I want to hold on to it."

I pulled her into a fierce hug, trying to hold on to her as tightly as she promised she held on to our future together. I guided us to her bed, positioning her face down so I could ease some of her tension. She helped me remove her sweater and bra, then her jeans, underwear, and socks.

"Felicity, I don't think I will ever tire of seeing your beautiful body laid out for me. I hope you know that every day you're in New York, and I'm here in Chicago. These last seven days will be on never ending replay for my jerk reel."

I shucked off my jeans and briefs, making quick work of yanking off my shirt and undershirt, and straddled her legs, and appreciated the perfectly rounded globes of her ass. With each firm stroke of my hands, she would groan and push herself into my hands, silently begging for more.

"Do you have off for President's Day?" I asked. "That's in about eight weeks. Maybe I can come out to you and you can show me around New York?"

While I made plans for the trip, my hands worked out the knots in her back and up over her shoulders.

“Since you’re living with Rex, and I know you can’t keep quiet, we could get a hotel somewhere. That way, when I do things like this,” I pushed into her from behind, nipping at her neck as I did. She lifted her hips up to meet me, keening as she welcomed the haze of pleasure.

I wanted to take my time. To worship every inch of skin on her body and have her begging me to stop. Her breasts in my hands, my teeth gently nibbling at her neck, and her hips grinding against my own, pulled me out into the ocean of need. I thrust into her with a driving pace, taking her just to the edge of her own orgasm before I pulled back, much to her dismay.

“I can’t touch all of you like this, princess. Sit on me.” I commanded. “I want you to mount your throne and remember whose Queen you are.”

The muscles of her pussy clamped around me so hard my eyesight went soft around the corners. She dug that. I found her clit, manipulating it with my thumb as I bounced her against me.

“That’s it,” I told her. “Show me how gorgeous you are when you come.”

Fuck, I wouldn’t last. I promised her I’d make love to her until the sun came up, and here I was instead, taking her down a lane of dirty talking and fast fucking.

“Come for me now, hard and fast, and then we can take our time. Nice and slow, until the sun comes up.”

“Klaus, I don’t think I can.” Her voice warbled as she ground against me. “All I can think about is how much I’m going to miss you.”

I sat up, pulling her to my chest.

“Oh Felicity, I’m going to miss you, too. But we’re going to make it work, right? Because all the best things are worth fighting for. And you, precious one, are worth it. I’ll fight for you until you tell me you’re tired of me.”

“Promise me.” She demanded. “Promise you won’t break my heart.”

I held her chin, forcing her to stare into my eyes.

“So help me, Felicity, regardless of what happens, your heart is my most precious treasure.”

I kissed her. But it was more than a kiss. It was every promise I just made, forged between our mouths, as we both unexpectedly fell headfirst into our completions.

TWENTY-FIVE



WE WENT into this with eyes wide open. I can't bemoan the fact that we led separate lives in different states. Walking toward that United gate felt like running a dulled, rusted, half functioning blade through my chest and rending my heart strings with fatigued jerks and pulls.

One week. A single week with the most amazing man, and that's all it took to test the fortitude of those newly glued together pieces of my heart. Klaus probably didn't even realize that he'd helped me heal. He showed me what it was like to feel seen. What it was to exist in the spotlight of someone's mindful attention. To be understood and desired.

I didn't want to turn my back on that. Not now. Not when I'd finally gotten used to depending on the strength of that. But I had a job to get back to. We had all the *New Year New You* bullshit to wade through, and quarterly ratings month was fast approaching. At least I'd be too busy to even realize how much I missed him.

Klaus: We'll make it work

Klaus: I promise I am all in

I wanted to believe him. In fact, I needed to depend on him when my brain drowned in doubt.

We talked every day. Sometimes multiple times a day in the beginning. But then the grind of our responsibilities cut our communication to text messages and evening phone calls. Those phone calls made more difficult thanks to the difference in time. Being an hour ahead of Klaus didn't seem like much, until trying to stay awake each night in order to talk before bedtime resulted in me falling asleep and missing his call on more than one occasion.

Our plans for President's Day got superseded by emergency changes to policy that directly affected how he went about his day, and therefore they rescinded his approval for time off. I planned to fly out to Chicago in March to go with Sera dress shopping but got waylaid by a late season snowstorm, and the trip got cancelled.

We remained committed to trying. We scheduled virtual dates on weekends and prioritized our phone calls and the time we scheduled together. It felt like we were failing despite our best efforts.

“You look miserable.”

Bryce's assistant had requested a zoom conference with me. When he jumped on, I could see the circles under his eyes. His smile didn't reach his eyes like it usually did.

“Thanks ball of sunshine, you’re looking right chipper yourself.”

“You know, being CEO of a company is hard work. All those years, I thought my dad just played golf and went to lunch. He never told me this job actually required me to do things.”

Given he was one of the hardest working men I knew his self-deprecating spoiled trust fund boy jokes were meant to be charming.

“I miss Klaus.” I told him. “I thought if we tried really hard, we could do the long-distance thing. But it’s only been twelve weeks, and it’s torture. I miss him so much; you wouldn’t believe how many times this week I’ve been on job boards looking for TV jobs in Chicago.”

“Listen,” He held up his hand as if to press pause on my long-winded explanation, “I was just meeting with one of my senior managers and we discovered a need to establish a charitable arm of Ellis Industries. My mom used to handle all the philanthropy and the tedious glad handing that came with that. But since my dad retired, she also wants to retire from her duties as a CEO’s wife. I hope I’m not overstepping here, but I remember Klaus mentioning that he aspired to run a charitable fund. I thought I’d reach out to you and get a sense of his temperature, and see if you thought he would want to be considered? Despite Penn and I being in Chicago, Ellis Enterprises is technically based in New York—a very small team works out of homebase now. The rest of us dot the country from the east coast to the west. It would enable him to

move to you for this new opportunity. Do you think he would bite?"

It was a kernel of hope I desperately wanted to hang on to. I hoped he would. In fact, I booked a flight home just so I could present the option myself.

TWENTY-SIX



I MISSED FELICITY SO MUCH. Sometimes I wondered if I'd concocted her out of thin air. If I'd been so desperate for companionship at Christmas, that I'd suffered some kind of mental breakdown that had me hallucinating the whole thing. But then I'd walk through the rental house and find something insignificant that proved to me we'd existed there together. Whether it was a stray bobby pin in the master bathroom or a lingering whiff of her perfume in the closet.

The alarm on my phone went off, reminding me I had ten minutes until our weekly date. She'd asked me to come over to the house so we could recreate our pizza date from the first night we met. It felt silly, but anything to make her happy these days. Every time we signed on to FaceTime, I felt like she looked just a little sadder than the time before. I worried constantly that this wasn't enough for her.

I'd talk to my HR rep at work to see how close I was to earning my points. I learned I'd actually miscalculated my eligibility date. In fact, I'd become fully vested last year already. When Felicity hopped on our FaceTime, I planned to

ask her what she thought about me looking for jobs in New York.

I saw a pair of headlights reflect off the glass in the living room, lighting up the space for a good minute before finally pulling away. I know that there was no rental this week. I'd double checked with Heidi before committing to it with Felicity.

The doorbell rang, and suddenly I second guessed the confirmation with Heidi and worried I'd gotten the days confused.

"Hi." Felicity stood at the door, suitcase in hand. "I've missed you."

She barely got the words out before she was in my arms.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, peppering her with kisses, "I can't believe you're here. I must be dreaming."

"Definitely not a dream. Let's go sit. I have so much to tell you."

"The first full day that we were here. You were outside shoveling the snow and I was standing right there by the picture window, arguing with Sera over me staying here. She told me she felt it in her bones that the universe had intentions for me here in Chicago. That I was supposed to be here. She felt something significant would happen to me while I was here.

"Jokingly I asked the universe to deliver me a man who was kind, who cared more about being a decent human being than making money, would never cheat on me, was financially

stable, liked to take control in bed, was a selfless lover that didn't mind indulging in giving oral as much as he enjoyed receiving it, and who could hold an intellectual conversation."

She smiled at me, a sweet blush dotting the apples of her cheeks.

"On New Year's Eve, Sera and I were talking, and I realized I wished for you, Klaus. The universe delivered you on a silver platter. Every single thing I wished for. And I never want to lose it. Lose you. These three months have been torture for me. I was online yesterday looking for jobs in Chicago because I don't want to lose you."

I stood up, the chair practically falling over with how quickly I pushed out of it and was at her side in a heartbeat.

"Felicity, you don't have to."

"I know." She smiled, "I talked to Bryce yesterday, and it looks like the Universe wants to deliver you your dreams too. He needs someone to head up his philanthropic efforts and called me to see if you'd be interested in taking it. He said he's ready to chat with you about it whenever you're interested."

"Here?" I asked.

She shook her head, biting her lip to contain a face splitting smile so bright I couldn't help but mimic it.

"In New York."

"Felicity, I love you. I love you so much.

TWENTY-SEVEN



8 MONTHS Later

I used to laugh when people would tell me to throw my intentions into the universe. It seemed impossible to me that if I randomly spoke into the air that I needed something, that suddenly some little elf somewhere would take down my request on a notepad and stick that order in the happiness-maker somewhere waiting for it to pop out the other side, like some kind of karmic Easy Bake oven.

I couldn't have imagined, as I bathed in heart break, barely able to breathe from the pain, that I would ever find "up" one day. Let alone have my perfect Gingerbread Man appear out of nowhere like some romance version of Santa Claus ready to grant my every wish.

Falling in love with Klaus happened so quick, and so hard. That wasn't me. I wasn't the rose-colored-glasses twin. I was the planner. The realist. The one who rolled my eyes when people said it was love at first sight. Yet the attraction to Klaus was immediate and unceasing. I still hadn't gotten used to being so fully present and feeling so seen.

“Are you ready?” Klaus asked, zipping up his puffer vest. “I figured it’s probably easier to take the subway to NYU than to grab the car and drive over.”

I’d been so focused on making sure I had all the equipment for my shoot, I missed what he said.

“Earth to Felicity,” He tugged at my braid, smiling down at me from where I knelt, packing my camera bag. “We’re supposed to be at the dorms in twenty minutes.”

Weeks after Klaus accepted the position at Ellis Philanthropic Trust, I moved out of my brother’s loft and the two of us found an adorable walk up in Murray Hill. Sure, it wasn’t my swanky apartment in TriBeCa or Rex’s uber posh condo in Battery Park, but it was ours, noisy radiators and all.

One of the Ellis Philanthropic Trust recipients was a foundation called New Pathways for Youth. They provided young adults aging out of Foster Care a host of resources to help them succeed as adults. Anything from household goods to skill building, as well as a community to help them succeed in college, trade, and technical school. It was my first day shooting a documentary following the latest group of “graduates” leaving the system.

Filmmaking didn’t pay the bills. It was purely a passion project to build up my portfolio. I still worked on television, though I’d decided I needed a fresh start away from celebrity gossip. The local public access channel had needed an Executive Producer, and while taking a public access job may have been a step down, I stepped up into an Executive

Producer role, so really, it was a wash. Plus, no one cared if my boots were Channel or from Target.

The upside of working for public access is the shows that we produced were mainly *infotainment*, so truly, it was just a stone's throw from documentary producing, anyway. But it was something Klaus enthusiastically encouraged and supported.

“Felicity?”

I heard my name as we crossed into Washington Square Park.

“I almost didn't recognize you.” He said, pulling me into a hug.

At one point in my life, I craved those hugs. Loved being loved by him. But now, feeling his arms around me not only felt foreign, but contrived.

“Xander?”

I don't know if I would ever be at a place where he didn't cause my gut to clench. Of all the people I expected to run into on this side of the city, he was definitely not even in my top twenty-five. Xander seemed exactly the same. I felt as if I'd had this huge metamorphosis over the last fifteen months since seeing him last. Yet, at least by dress, body language, and general intonation, he seemed like the same Xander.

“This is my fiancé, Klaus.” I introduced them.

Shortly after Klaus had accepted the job and made the move to New York, he'd proposed. I would have gone to the courthouse that day and married him, but Klaus wanted to wait

at least a few months. He wanted to make sure I didn't feel pressured into getting married, even if he was "old and impatient."

Sera and Bryce would get married on New Year's Eve, and once their wedding was over, and they were back from their honeymoon to the South Pacific, we'd get married. More than likely in a much less grand affair than them.

"What are you doing all the way out here?" I asked him, checking my watch to make sure I wasn't running late. "I thought you hated the scene in the Village."

He couldn't take his eyes off Klaus. I'll admit that made me preen a bit. New York looked good on Mr. "I only wear Old Navy." Though he looked good in anything he wore, and definitely looked best when he was in our bed with nothing on at all.

"You know, the only reason I come to the Village is for food." He laughed. "I'm meeting some of my friends here. How about you?"

"I'm shooting a documentary."

He rose his eyebrows at me in surprise. Rather than waste the effort reminding him he thought it was a pipe dream, I chose instead to be proud of reaching for my dreams. "We actually need to get going," I took Klaus' hand, "we were on our way there."

Klaus wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pressing a kiss to my temple as we headed toward campus.

“It was nice to bump into you, Felicity.” Xander called to my retreating back.

He may have said something about getting a drink sometime to catch up, but we lost his comment to the atmospheric sounds of a Saturday in New York.

“I’m real proud of you, princess.” Klaus whispered in my ear as we stood waiting for the stoplight to change color.

“Oh? Why is that?” His nose in my hair and his lips caressing my pulse point sent liquid fire down through my veins.

“You took the high road. You would have had every right to tell Xander what a piece of shit he was for trying to break you. Instead, you showed him that, in fact, you remain unbroken. A beautiful, glorious phoenix that rose from the ashes of that heartbreak.”

While his pride meant the world to me, I realized how much I’d truly moved past that life. Xander didn’t have any hold on my emotions. He could have been a stranger passing by, telling me they liked my coat. It was a blip on the course of my day. In a few months, when I reflected on the trajectory of the documentary, I’d probably forget we even ran into him.

“It’s because of you.” I told him, taking hold of his chin and pulling him in for a kiss. “Because of you, my heart is too full of love to feel anything for anyone else.”

Last Christmas delivered me a miracle when I never expected to receive one. In a single moment of weakness, booking an Airbnb to avoid having to witness someone else’s

love hand delivered me an avenue to heal, and to love the person I was. Especially because the best version of me reflected in the eyes of the people I cared about most. Christmas would forever hold a tender place in my heart. Not only because the holiday brought family together, but because it was the holiday my very own Klaus checked my list and delivered everything I could ever need, wrapped up in a singular package.

WILLOW'S MEA CULPA



For those who have read me before, you know that I use my mea culpa to admit/acknowledge/accept all of the shit that I took serious creative license on in my book. As a reminder this is a literal last minute brain dump thrown into the back of the book just before I hit publish—so there's probably going to be typos. No one sees this but me. And probably a lot of F words because once I get to this point in a story... that's about all that's left.

Before I get on to my Mea Culpa's, I want to say that sometimes holidays are really hard for people. Sometimes the stress of the holidays leads to family drama, or maybe there is lingering family drama, or just the thought of being alone is too hard. Reach out to your friends. Even if it's just a text to say hi or an offer to meet for coffee.

Recently someone I know went missing for a full week. I honestly feared the worst. In speaking with them after they resurfaced they didn't feel like they had anyone to reach out to because they feared being a burden. So please check in on your friends and family because loneliness can sometimes

seem like a fathomless depth that is impossible to surface from.

I know I talk a lot about all the strange kismety goodness that feeds my writer soul. This one is blow your mind kind of kismet. As I wrote Rental Clause the running commentary in my head on never ending repeat was “damn this is too long. Am I being long winded? They haven’t kissed yet. Should they have kissed?. What if people complain that they haven’t even kissed yet and it’s too slow of a burn?”

So after I wrote the RC kissing scene I went back to Sera’s book. I shit you not. Sera and Bryce’s first kissing scene happens on my Word Doc Page 29 and SO DOES FELICITY’S! They’re not even actual people. Not actual twins with any kind of weird twin connection YET in MY BRAIN they both have a first kiss at EXACTLY the same place in the story. I am literally just like thank you universe I hear you loud and fucking clear. WHAT ARE THE ODDS THOUGH!?! Seriously.

Speaking of odd... there’s oddly a lot of myself in this book. Like more than there normally is. Obviously people draw their stories from their own experiences but Felicity apparently decided she wanted some of my childhood traumas. Haha.

I realized as I wrote Klaus that having someone German, especially around the holidays might not be all that well received. But with a name like Klaus he kinda had to be German. And I needed his name to be Klaus because I’d tied

him to the name of the book early on without really thinking about the trajectory of the book.

My parents are German immigrants. They're *very* Americanized because they both came over as young children but so many of my parents friends are also German. Also I had (I have one remaining grandma who is 96) ... four very German grandparents. VERY German. So Leo, Heidi and Klaus are all kind of kaleidoscope of living life as a German in Chicago.

We never got to have sugar cereals, or most of the things my friends got to. But I did get a visit from St Nicholas every December 6th and HE brought us European chocolate.

My mom is actually the one that grew up in Andersonville. Which technically is Swedish town (Chicago in the old days was very lineated based on culture/heritage). It's presently Rosenball season so my Facebook feed is packed with pictures from the parties at the various culture centers and everyone's adorable kids dressed in their Christmas best.

I'm pretty sure one of us (me or my sisters) were called ungrateful at various points in our childhoods by our grandparents (who had survived the depression and the war). The one I specifically remember was the year Nintendo came out and all of us received as a collective gift, a Sega Genesis for xmas and (probably me) made mention that we'd asked Santa for a **Nintendo**. I'm sure I wasn't complaining merely pointing out Santa's lack of detail orientation but

Im not sure how many of my friends actually read my books but the story of the choir teacher... if you know you

know. Hahah. I didn't even bother to change her initial. ☹️

When I wrote D & S I swear I had a whole scene that talked about Seraphim and Felicity's super christmasy sounding names and why their parents chose them. But I've gone through all of my notes all of my dead darlings (the scenes I cut for word count or just general meandering plot lines)... nothing. So maybe I dreamed I wrote that scene. If someone finds it and is like Willow lay off the psychedelics its here in chapter four – a free signed book is in it for you. Until then Felicity's name is Felicity Cherubim.

If you haven't read D & S the jokes may not make sense. Hopefully for those that **have** read it, you appreciated them. I always worry Im the only one entertained by them. Like the European judges comment. If you read D & S you'll remember (hopefully) their conversation in Antartica on the boat. I just had to bring it back full circle. And let me tell you. I think I fretted over Bryce's proposal more than an actual man would over an actual woman. I tried to think of all the scenarios and which seemed most appropriate for someone like Bryce and how after he'd planned to literally go to the ends of the earth for the *other* Sarah Miller... what would say to this Sera Miller "you are my everything." I finally settled on this proposal because I think Sera established throughout her book that she isn't the kind that needs the grand gestures. She just wants someone to see her and understand her. And, a night playing games with her family and getting completely blindsided by a proposal that's sappy and sentimental as fuck... I really think I nailed it.

I wrote Sera and Bryce's opera scene from Sera's point of view. Its too short to be anything more than an aside, so if you're interested in it—it's past the teasers for my upcoming books.

I didn't keep a running tally of Mea Culpa's this time, so hopefully I catch them all.

1. I'm not hip on the New York scene. All of my location placement, neighborhoods etc were a result of Google Maps. Even though the map says Tribeca is spelled like that everywhere else it's TriBeCa so IDK I was trying to be like a hip local. If you're like Willow Girl, no one wants to live in Murray Hill it's a rat infested dump. MEA CULPA. I'm a Chicago Girl, through and through

2. Every opinion Felicity has from Parent Trap to Gilmore Girls A Year in a Life... yep, it's me. But just in case Amy Sherman Paladino ever happens upon this book because somehow there was a zombie apocalypse and the burned and tattered remains of this book were all that was left of some random town in the wilderness... hey girl. Honestly though, why. Why did we have to ruin the most amazing series by shoehorning the season seven you never got rather than incorporate the story arcs the characters had already achieved. And then to cliffhang us with literally zero plans to pick it back up? Just no.

3. I will not apologize to Macy's for continuing to refer to the Chicago stores as Marshall Fields. #NotSorry
#BitterPartyofOne

3a. Nearly all of my best childhood xmas memories are from that **Marshall Fields** State Street store and sitting under that giant tree in the Walnut Room.

3b. Not many people read my earliest works *Dirty Little Secret* and *Secrets of the Heart*. It's cool if you haven't. They're kind of locked away to wither in the dust. I like them but they're in third person they were written as Chic Lit and then when that genre kind of imploded I added some sex scenes in them and published them as romance . They don't really "fit" anywhere in particular. They're cute stories but ☹️. I've thought about using them as like a free book for a newsletter signup but they're so off brand now from what I write it would lead readers in the wrong direction. Anyhow, I digress. If you have read them *Hillary*, *Ivy*, the whole *Marshall Fields* commentary might make a bit more sense. It's not earth shattering information that is desperately needed to understand anything. I think most of the *Marshall Field* history is in *Ivy's* books along with some of the other big money barons of the time. When I wrote *Ivy's* book I developed a strange fascination with *Marshall Field* and his family because I wrote her book right around the time that *Marshall Field* (then owned by *Target* after being sold by the *Fields* family) was selling to *Macy's* and the stores were going to change. At the time *Marshall Fields* was synonymous with quality, customer service, all of the staples of a high end department store. These days...meh. If you are from *Chicago* or are just a bit of a historian, the *Field* family's contributions to the city of *Chicago* are immense and expand into so many different things. And to be honest — anyone with an affinity for the old

time holiday songs like Frosty, Rudolf, etc etc have Marshall Field and Montgomery Ward to thank for those as they originated as Christmas Schticks to get people to shop at their stores.

4. I'm sure at some point in the progression of Klaus' life he talked to Leo again. There just wasn't a reason to introduce him back into the story except to be like oh hey don't forget Klaus has a brother too, and it wasn't imperative to the story line so *shrugs*

4a. Also incidentally there was also a scene I cut out because it was too boring between Felicity and Klaus where she asked if he had any family other than Leo. It was going to tease a book with Klaus' cousin Edwin (Wheeler) who lives in the Florida Keys. He'll be the main character for my Man of the Month book in July: Enemies in Earnest. He lives in a town that celebrates Christmas all year round— and it may be a spot that Felicity and Klaus make an appearance.

5. For anyone who actually works for a state aid service, or a help line, I condensed a lot of different services and areas into a single streamlined service. I know this. For anyone that is like Willow, girl, they'd have to call eleventy eleven places to get access to all of that. Girl I know. I wish it was simpler for people to get help when they need it. Incidentally as part of volunteer organization I'm belong to here in Phoenix, we're working on this very thing specific to child-help and well being. Not on the grand scale that Rex and Regina talk about with AI but pretty close. It's exciting.

6. I know I keep dropping little bites of this story with Rex and Regina. When I tell you I'm obsessed with them like it's in line with how much I love Bryce and Sera, but different. I've never written a story like theirs before and it's going to take a while to write it. I don't want to rush that one. I have the most beautiful cover for their story. It will be called Salve. No promises that it will be a 2023 book. The story is coming to me in bits and pieces. Right now it's just a random amalgamation of scenes that aren't really weaved together. But they're an addictive couple. They occupy my thoughts even if I'm not fully focused on their story right now.

7. If you haven't read the Murray Brothers (Thirst Trap, Flirt Like a Champ and Secret Santa) Harlow (briefly mentioned in the opera scene,) is the love interest of Cash Murray in Flirt Like a Champ, and makes a reappearance in Secret Santa. That timeline (Secret Santa) crosses over this timeline for the opera scene. And that whole Harlow working in the opera and Sera being an opera singer was so much kismismet-y goodness that if you've read/followed the progression of my stories this year from book to book, you already know this and are yawning and rolling your eyes at me going gaga over another sign from the universe. But... mmm.. I love those!

The next book coming up brings us back to Harlow and her sister Lennox as we tell the tale of Lennox and her neighbor from hell in King of the Cul De Sac. After that is Anders nephew in Mile High Monarch and then I'm taking a very long creative break and won't be publishing again until July.

As always, thank you so much for supporting my dreams. There is nothing I love more than coming and playing make believe in worlds of my choosing. Writing has always been my solace and my escape, and I am eternally grateful that you sit down somewhere around the world, take hold of my hand, and allow me to show you what I've created. Thank you. From the very bottom of my heart.

To Andi Lynne and the Unicorn Tribe... I love you infinity. Know that every day I think about you and feel incredibly lucky to call you all friends.

BROKEN HEARTED BRYCE SEARCHING FOR SARAH MILLER



It was the TikTok heard around the world. Broken hearted Bryce getting cheated on by his girlfriend the same day he bought her a trip around the world where he intended to propose. The tickets? Nonrefundable. That was what his TikTok said. He needed to find someone, anyone named Sarah Miller in the greater Boston area (or even within the Continental U.S.) to join him on the trip of a lifetime. Two strangers rooming together on a cruise around the world?

What could go wrong?

This curvy heroine, broken hero, instalove, travel romance is guaranteed safe with no cliffhangers and no cheating (other

than the ex-girlfriend Bryce kicked to the curb). Why not set sail on the trip of a lifetime!

Available on All Platforms!

MEET PRESLEY MURRAY & PRISCILLA KING



Presley

I can't go anywhere without someone asking if I'm the brother of *the* Beckett Murray. Yes, I am. The middle brother. Also, a swimmer who was never good enough to make the Olympic cut. The new job in Texas couldn't have come at a better time. Finally, I'll be able to make my mark on the swimming world as a coach for a Big 12 University.

My landlord asks me to take part in some kind of auction I have zero time to take part in, and just to get her to leave me alone, I agree to take part in her Secret Santa exchange among the residents of Fitzpatrick Place. The woman I get? A sinfully curvy woman named Priscilla who owns a kitschy little diner on the edge of town. I'll play along for the week of gift-giving

and merriment, but I need to show the university that while I'm not my brother, I'm equally skilled in the pool. I can't afford any distractions. So why can't I stop thinking of her smile, the way she sings along to the jukebox when she thinks no one is paying attention, or how sexy she looks in those unassuming fifties dresses?

Priscilla

I've lived in Fitzpatrick Place ever since I moved back home five years ago. Had it been risky overhauling my mom's greasy spoon to a fifties-inspired, Elvis-themed diner? Maybe. But, from the moment I stepped into my *blue suede shoes* five years ago, I'd yet to slow down.

Fitzzy exhausted herself trying to play matchmaker for me. I just didn't have time. That diner was my whole life. I reluctantly agreed to be part of the building's Secret Santa gift exchange, getting some new guy in D3 who was practically a ghost. He would get some cute gifts from me because I had no time to introduce new people to the neighborhood or entertain total strangers. I'd do my best at holiday cheer—but it would be the bare minimum.

One day he plays messenger for my own Secret Santa, and suddenly I see him everywhere: the bookstore, the elevator, and call me crazy, but it feels like he's finding any excuse to come to the diner.

Now he's *always on my mind*, and I can't *just pretend* that I'm not *all shook up* every time he looks at me with those deep blue eyes and uneven smile. I guess *it's now or never*,

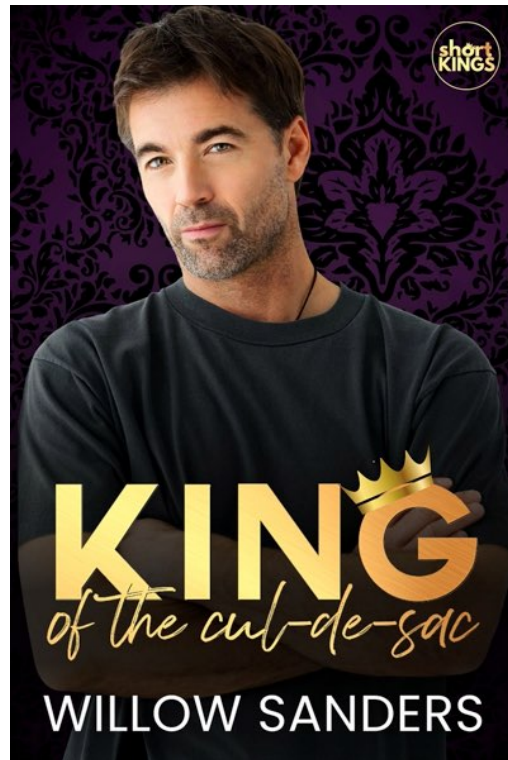
especially since I'm *lonesome tonight*. Hopefully, putting myself out there won't land me in the *heartbreak hotel*.

Secret Santa is a curvy heroine, matchmaker, holiday romance that is guaranteed safe with no cheating and no cliffhangers.

Why not spend some time at Fitzpatrick Place?

Available for Pre Order

MEET LENNOX SHAW & JESSE KING



He reported her to the HOA and now he's about to learn you don't cross Lennox Shaw. But when an emergency pops up and his help is her only option, she'll soon realize the "Little Napoleon," isn't afraid of a skirmish or two.

Releases January 2023 (Pre Order Now!)

BRYCE'S BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

Life with Bryce was a magical whirlwind. So much had happened since we stepped off that boat, and he came to Chicago to find me. While the hotel industry slowly recovered, Bryce and Penn put their European expansion dreams on hold, waiting for a more stable time to enter that market. Instead, they focused on firming up their executive team so that the pressure of running a national hotel chain didn't fall just on their shoulders.

The patriarch of the family, Elias Ellis, Bryce and Penn's dad, decided it was time for him to retire. That left the day-to-day running of their hotel properties to the brothers and whomever they brought into their confidences within the executive team. To compound on that sudden change, Esther also planned to step back from the family business. I honestly think Bryce took that news harder than his dad, leaving the day-to-day operations for him and Penn. Though, with Esther retiring, she told the brothers Ellis that she planned to spend lots of time visiting us in Chicago.

“Angel, we need to hurry.” Bryce tapped at his fancy oversized watch, standing in the hallway, watching me in the

mirror. “The roads still aren’t totally cleared and this four o’clock reservation is firm. There’s no wiggle room.”

The moment the roads were safe to travel, Bryce was at my parent’s house collecting me for the day. He promised I’d get plenty of family birthday time later that evening with the festivities he had planned with the entire group of them, but the daytime was reserved, just for him. Not that I could complain.

Penn and Raven flew home to New Castle to spend the holidays with both sets of parents. I’d almost broken down and said we should go as well. I’d only met Bryce’s parents twice since we came back from our round-the-world whirlwind, and both times it had been brief. It would have been nice to get to know them in their own environment. But my sister and I pinky promised we would spend our birthday together this year after nearly a year apart.

“How does it look?”

In France, Bryce introduced me to a friend of his Isabel Marant, who was a world-famous fashion designer. He asked her to create a couture gown just for me. I’d yet to have a reason to wear it and thought a birthday dinner was a bit excessive of an opportunity to put it on, but he insisted.

“I should ask Isabel to make an entire closet full of dresses for you.” Bryce took my hand, grazing his lips against my knuckles. “I’d show you just how gorgeous you are in this dress, but we’re already behind schedule and you don’t have time for hair and makeup adjustments. I guess I’ll be the one doing adjustments for the next few hours.”

A firm press of my hand accompanied the sultry comment against the piece of him that definitely needed some shifting, lest everyone know what we didn't have time to do before we left the house. Being in a house alone for the last day had been heaven. It was the first time in a couple of months that we could go back to having totally normal, not quiet sex.

My dress was a dream. Never mind that it fit like a heavenly glove that highlighted all the things I loved about my body and hid every inch of the things that bothered me. It was just simply gorgeous. It was a deep midnight blue with dusty sequins along the hemline to make it look like the night sky. The lace decolletage was dotted with rhinestones and the whole dress looked like magic personified. While it was neither low cut nor revealing, it made me feel sexy and fierce. As per usual, the Bryce Ellis magic wand had delivered personal hair and makeup people to the house on Christmas Eve so that whatever my hair and makeup vision was, there was someone on hand to deliver it to me.

“What’s with all the clock and dagger, Ellis?” I asked, trying to position myself as gracefully as possible in his SUV without crinkling my dress.

“You’ll see.” He pressed a kiss to my lips, tucking the hem of my dress beneath my legs before shutting my door for me.

My family lived in the suburbs, though Bryce pulled out of the garage and drove deeper into the city, heading straight for the loop.

“Ellis, where are we going? Are you stealing me for my birthday night, too? Did you clear this to my sister? After I

made such a tremendous deal about spending our birthday together, she'll have a fit if I don't see her at all today."

He smirked at me, concentrating on the still slippery roads.

"It's taken care of." He said, "you will not miss a second of family time, cross my heart."

We drove down an alleyway and made a sharp turn into an underground parking lot.

"Way to play the long game." I gaped at the empty parking garage as we circled lower and lower into the depths of Chicago's underground.

"I don't understand." Bryce pushed the car into park and cut the engine.

"Four months on a ship, nearly a year of dating, and you wait until my birthday to off me in a dark parking lot in some unknown building in the middle of the city I was born in. That will throw everyone off your trail."

"Angel, you are my wildest dreams come true." He kissed my forehead before running his nose along mine before pulling me in for a kiss. "You have given me so many things that I thought I lost. Hope for the future, confidence, a solid path to travel alongside you, but most of all, love. You gave me so much love that I overflow with it every day. I'm grateful for you in my life, and grateful for your life. My wish for you for this birthday and every birthday after this is that you hold in your heart a belief that every single dream you have is within your grasp. That you have the confidence to reach for them because with me by your side, I will always do

everything in my power to ensure every dream you have is realized.”

A woman peeked her head around the corner of a gigantic metal door I hadn't realized was in the wall. She saw us in the car and waved at us.

“I love you Seraphim Claire Miller.” Bryce's hand went around the back of my neck, and he pulled me against his mouth. In that moment of connection between the two of us, I swear I felt every emotion he'd just talked about feeling.

“Happy Birthday.” He told me, swiping along my bottom lip with his thumb. “Now we need to shake a leg before Harlow breaks our legs.”

She'd begun signaling wildly from the door. As we approached, her come hither waves got faster and became more neurotic.

“Bryce, what part of four o'clock sharp was confusing to you?” She asked, ushering us inside.

Bryce collected my coat as we walked down a dark, carpeted hallway.

“Are you warmed up?” Harlow turned to me with a smile.

“Birthday surprise, Harlow.” Bryce informed her, a smile tinging his voice.

Harlow stopped so fast and turned to face us. I nearly collided with her.

“Um... Bryce, this isn't the kind of surprise she can just walk into cold. You need to warm up for these kinds of

things.”

“Guys, I’m fine. Sure, it’s wintertime and I’m in a dress made of pounds of fabric that are full of microscopic holes that do nothing to protect the wind, but it’s warm enough in here. I’m good. Warm enough.”

That’s when I heard it. An orchestra. Not just an orchestra, but a full, eighty-piece orchestra. The piece they played swelled to full forte, and my heart and soul stretched, preened, and skittered through my nervous system with delight.

“Earl Ellis,” I practically squeaked, “did you disabuse the Ellis trust funds again?”

“The trust is safe. All of its pennies are in place. I will explain later if you truly want the details, but this is where your path splits from mine. Harlow will take you the rest of the way, my Angel. Break a leg.”

He smirked, kissed me, and turned, hand in pockets, toward another door.

“Break a leg?” I turned toward Harlow, stunned.

“I guess it falls on me to reveal the big surprise, then. Umm, surprise? We’re running a final dress for The Magic Flute and you get to be Queen of the Night for the next seven minutes and thirty-six seconds. Or you will if we can get you quickly in makeup and then onstage and warmed up in the next fifteen minutes.”

She pressed her finger to her ear to listen to someone chattering on her radio.

“Bryce assured me you knew this piece backward and forward.”

“I do. I was the intern understudy at Boston Lyric.” While my smile was wide and uncontrolled, my insides shifted in a slight panic that I was about to walk out onto a stage, unprepared and not warmed up to perform the role of my dreams at the very place this crazy life’s path had begun when I was nine years old.

“You can run your scales here to gain some semblance of a warmup. I’ll go collect your wand and mic pack.”

It seemed as if I blinked and I was mic’d and being led stage left to observe from the wing. It was then I noticed that it wasn’t just a dress rehearsal in the sense I was used to. In that, no one other than the director, a few stagehands, and various other members of the ensemble watched as it ran through. No. This was a full dress performance with people in the audience. And not just two or three. It looked as if the whole fucking main floor of the opera house was full. On Christmas Eve? The day after a blizzard these people woke up and said ‘hey I’m going to go to the opera today to watch a dress rehearsal!’ What alternate reality did I exist in?

“Alright, I’m going to count you in.” Harlow whispered from where she stood. “The stage lights will go down. You’ll see the floor lights leading you to the middle of the stage. You are the red tape.”

Harlow counted down from ten, and it was as if my soul left my body, flew to the audience, and took a seat right there in the front row to watch me. My feet practically floated

toward where I needed to stand. Despite not knowing a soul on that stage, I felt as if I'd performed with them for years. Even having only had a handful of minutes to warm up, everything in my body knew what I expected from it. I'd been singing that aria since my first year in voice lessons. I sang it in my head as I fell asleep sometime. That aria was burned into the very marrow of my being.

It was in the last few beats of the song, just as I was about to turn and storm off the stage in fury at the end of my aria that I noticed my family in one of the opera boxes. Not just Bryce, mind you, but my parents, my brother, sister, and some of my new work friends.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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