



SECOND CHANCE

Scrooge

J.J. GRICE

SECOND CHANCE
SCROOGE

CURVES FOR CHRISTMAS

J.J. GRICE

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](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Curves for Christmas Series](#)

[Also by J.J. Grice](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Morgan

I hate Christmas. This time of year makes me itch and I constantly feel as if I'm crawling out of my skin. Don't get me wrong, it's great for business. But as far as I can tell, that's the only upside to this holiday anymore. I hate decorating, but it's expected in a place like this. If I didn't, then I would be the only shop in town not decked out in tinsel and twinkle lights. So I play the part. I put on a smile and help everyone and their brother pick out the perfect piece of jewelry, accessory, or other random knick-knack for everyone on their list.

I don't mind that part at all. Helping a little boy find the most unique, one of a kind necklace for his mom. Or a husband who wants to get his wife something more special than just the standard diamond earrings from a mainstream jewelry store. It's the holiday music and the obnoxious decorations, the over the top outfits. It's all of that crap that I can't stand anymore.

"Do you happen to have anything like this in red?" I snap out of my internal ramblings and turn my attention to the woman holding out the blue scarf. I give her a bright smile and eye her outfit while holding back a laugh. A green crushed velvet turtleneck with a red jean jacket and matching pants. Even her boots are green and blend with her head-to-toe Christmas look perfectly. Perfect example of the obnoxious

outfits I can't stand. I mean hell, we're in Texas and it sure as hell isn't cold enough for so many layers right now.

"I don't have that in red," I answer her while walking over to one of my other displays, "but I do have it in green." When I hold out the green silk her face lights up like it's already Christmas morning.

"That's perfect!" She snatches the scarf from my hand and continues to flit around the store in excitement and I can't help but let the small smile pull at my lips. I may hate Christmas personally, but I will never fault anyone else for loving it. I have my own reasons for loathing this time of year, and if I'm being completely honest, it has nothing to do with the holiday itself.

"Hey hey!" The bell over the door chimes as my best friend walks in with way more enthusiasm than anyone should have for a Monday.

"What are you doing here?" It's rare that I see her during the week, let alone in the middle of the day, unless we make plans for lunch.

"I only had to go in and make sure everything was good to go for the party on Friday. We have the rest of the week off."

"Wow, Daddy must be feeling generous this Christmas." I give Jules a humorous smirk which only makes her roll her eyes. We've known each other since we were kids and the entire time, it's never been a secret that her father loves Christmas. The entire Richardson family is kind of obsessed with the holiday. Something I used to find enduring.

"Well, Bryce gets in tonight, so he's extra excited. The prodigal son returns." Just hearing his name has my body heating with humiliation and regret.

"I'm surprised they could spare him." I do everything in my power to make my tone of voice sound casual, but I have no idea if I actually achieve it or not because Jules has honed in on one of the new pairs of earrings I made last week.

"These are gorgeous!" She holds up the rose gold dangling earrings and her eyes light up with excitement, another feeling

I absolutely love.

“Everything at the LA office is running smoothly so he was able to leave for a few weeks.” It takes me a moment to realize that she’s responding to my last comment about her brother.

“I’m sure your parents are thrilled.”

Luckily the subject about the one person I hate thinking about drops as she continues to float around the store, looking at the new stuff I just put out this morning. Miss Festive in the head-to-toe red and green comes to the counter with an armful of stuff and I can’t control the bright grin that splits my face.

“I just love your store!” She gushes the entire time I ring up her items and a sense of pride fills me from her words. I love my store, too. Usually when I tell people about the different types of products I sell, they think I’m crazy and always give me that pitying, *well I hope it works out for you*, look that drives me nuts. It may not be the most traditional idea for a store, especially in this part of Texas. But I’ve managed to turn a pretty decent profit for the past two years. So clearly I’m doing something right.

Once Miss Festive pays and walks out of the store with an overstuffed bag, Jules comes up to the front counter with a few different items and sets them down.

“You know I would just give you that stuff, right?” She always does this. She doesn’t come here too often, because she’s usually working during my business hours, but when she does she always ends up buying a bunch of things and never even lets me give her a discount.

“What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t actually support your business?” It’s the same spiel she gives me every time, so I just let her ramble on as I ring up everything she chose. “You’re allowed to give me something for free twice a year, my birthday and Christmas.”

“Yeah yeah yeah.” I finish ringing her up and running her card before I sit on the stool I have next to the counter.

“So what’s the Richardson clan up to this week?”

“The usual.” she shrugs. “My dad’s parents will be in on Thursday and the rest of our extended family will be here on Sunday.”

“Sounds like a good time.”

“I’m just glad that Bryce is able to be here the whole time so I don’t have to face them all alone.” She lets out an exaggerated shudder that I just laugh at. Her dad comes from old money and everyone in their extended family exudes wealth. Like, to a snobbish level. If you don’t have at least seven figures in multiple bank accounts, then you absolutely are not worth their time.

“You know you’re welcome to all of it, right?” She gives me the same tentative look she always does when bringing up family gatherings. She invites me, but it’s been years since I’ve accepted. Her parents have been wonderful toward me and have taken me in as one of their own for years. But every time I’m around her aunts and uncles and grandparents, I always feel inadequate. It wasn’t as bad when I was younger, but now that I’m an adult, it’s like they all think I should just suddenly be wealthy. It’s a lot to handle.

“Thanks.” I don’t elaborate more than that, because I hate disappointing her. Luckily, she knows me better than anyone, so it’s not hard for her to figure out that it’s time to change the subject.

“Well, I better get going.” She starts heading to the door, but stops and turns back to me. “Did you want to get ready together on Friday?” My brows dip in confusion at her question.

“Ready for what?”

“The party?” She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “It’s for employees *and* clients, remember?” I do remember, though I was hoping she would be too busy to think about the fact that I should be going.

“I wasn’t gonna go, Jules.”

She turns around fully and places her hands on hips, I force myself not to groan out loud as I stand up because I

know the lecture is coming.

“Why the hell weren’t you going to go?”

“Jules-”

“You know what,” she interrupts me. “I don’t care. You’re going! You’re a client just like everyone else, and you deserve to be there.” She’s given this speech to me so many times. My business is small potatoes compared to most everyone else who banks with them. They have a department focused solely on small businesses, but there are really only a few of them. Even though Jules denies it, I still think the department only exists so they can get a tax break.

“Besides, if I’m going to be forced to mingle with a bunch of stuffy rich people, then I’m going to need you there with me.”

“Jules- you are a stuffy rich person.”

She jumps back and lets out a loud, over-exaggerated gasp. “I am not stuffy!”

I can’t help but laugh at the reaction I knew I would get from my comment.

“Please, Morgan. I need you there with me.” I let out a long sigh, knowing I can’t say no to her. For so long, Jules has pretty much been my only family and disappointing her is something I try really hard not to ever do.

“Okay, fine. I’ll be there.”

She eyes me for a moment, probably looking for any sign of deception, then gives me a bright smile.

“Great! I’ll see you there!”

Once she leaves, I slump back onto the stool and let out a heavy sigh. It’s not that I have a problem going to the party. There’s nothing wrong with them really. Free food that’s always delicious, and the expensive kind of champagne. But Juliet’s confirmation that her brother is going to be there adds an extra level of inadequacy to my self-esteem that I was really hoping to avoid.

I scrub my hands down my face before standing and getting to work tidying up my shop. I haven't always hated Christmas. Hell, there was a time in my life that I absolutely loved it. But when both your parents die in a car accident when you're twelve years old four days before the holiday, it kind of puts a damper on it. My uncle took me in and raised me. He was great, the fact that he was only twenty-two and raising a twelve year old was kind of a big deal. After that, holidays were spent with him and whatever girlfriend he had at the time watching bad movies and eating ramen noodles. Jules and her family always invited me, but going over there just felt wrong. I had a family, even if it was only one person, and holidays are meant to be spent with family. The moment I turned eighteen though, Uncle Mark took off with the girlfriend he had at the time and moved to California. I hear from him occasionally, usually a couple times a year. But he more or less washed his hands of me once I was able to take care of myself.

Only then did I start spending Christmas with Juliet's family. And it didn't take long to fall completely and totally head over heels in love with her brother. A love that for a brief moment I thought was returned. *But I was so damn wrong.*

CHAPTER TWO

Bryce

There are a lot of things about Texas that are completely different from California. The humidity being one of them. The moment I stepped off the plane, I could feel my clothes clinging to my already sweat soaked skin. It's something that never affected me growing up, but I've been away from it for almost a year now.

Though it's blistering hot right now, I know that in about an hour, the temperature will drop a lot, and it'll even be a little chilly. So I grab my leather jacket and slip it on over my gray t-shirt. I head out of my apartment toward where I parked near the pool entrance, but immediately realize my mistake. Betty Fitzpatrick, the building's owner who everyone just calls Fitzy, is in her usual spot by the pool drinking a martini. I slam myself against the wall, mentally cursing my bad luck. It's not that I don't like Fitzy. She's actually pretty damn awesome. Always throwing one party or another. Usually for charity. Hell, even my bank is having our employee and client Christmas party here this weekend because Fitzy has been a client of ours for decades now. But honestly, I just don't feel like having my biceps squeezed like watermelons. Or asked *whatever happened to that sweet girl you were seeing?* She always means well, but my mind is just too damn exhausted to deal with that right now.

I send up a silent prayer that I'll be able to sneak past her, and it looks like someone above is actually looking out for me.

When I peek back around the corner, Fitzzy is talking animatedly about something, her drinking sloshing all over the place, with one of the other residents. Without giving it another thought, I hurry past them, luckily without being seen, and make it out to my car.

Once I'm safely locked inside my vehicle, I let out a long, exhausted breath and lean back against the headrest. I can't exactly fault Fitzzy for always asking about Morgan. Everyone loves her. Even my own family. Hell, my parents have treated her like their own daughter for years now, since she and my sister Juliet are best friends. I realize it was pretty stupid to get involved with my sister's best friend in the first place, but I couldn't help it. Morgan is all woman, and I've been lusting after her since I first came home from college and started working for my dad. Last year, I finally worked up the nerve to do something about it, and everything was perfect.

Then I totally and completely, fucking blew it.

I PULL up to my parents house, taking a moment to breathe in the comfort just being close to my family provides. I don't hate California necessarily, but being so far away for the past eleven months hasn't exactly been easy. At first, I was okay with it. Needed it, really. It gave everyone time to get over what they think happened with Morgan. But once the storm passed, I just missed them all. Things are still a little chilly with my sister, but we're doing better. And either way, I'd still take things being rough between us and being close by, over things being fine but being states away.

As soon as I walk inside, I'm assaulted with the familiar smells of a home cooked meal and fresh baked dessert. The sound of Christmas music blasts through the speakers throughout the house and a smile tugs at my lips when I hear my mother's off tune singing coming from the kitchen. Christmas with my folks is always a big event. Mom loves Christmas, and Dad loves Mom so he gives her anything she wants. When I walk toward the kitchen, pausing in the

entryway, my smile grows when I see my mother dancing around in one of her silly Christmas outfits, and Dad sitting at the table watching her with a look on his face that only proves that she really is the center of his whole world.

Their love is something I always envied. When all of Dad's friends would lie and cheat on their wives with their secretaries, Dad never strayed because he knew he would never find someone better. They have an all consuming love that has only grown over the years. Thirty-Five years of marriage only solidified just how perfect they are for each other. Having them as an example of true love growing up, is exactly why I haven't gotten married yet *-no matter how much my mother pesters me about it-* because I refuse to settle for anything less than the real thing. There's only one woman I've even considered spending my life with, and she hates me now.

I shake those thoughts from my head, not wanting to damper my mood. I step further into the kitchen, catching dad's gaze, but mom is too focused on her one-woman concert to notice me. Without thinking too hard about it, I step closer to her and begin singing along at the top of my lungs, making her jump in surprise. As expected, she throws her arms around my neck in excitement, giving me a tight hug. I've seen dad since I flew in yesterday because we were at the office first thing this morning, but I haven't seen mom yet.

"My baby's home!" I laugh at her description of me, because I really don't think very many people would consider a thirty-three year old man to be a baby. But as she constantly tells me, *I'll always be her baby.*

"I missed you, mom."

"Well, if you missed me so much then you should move back here permanently." I force myself not to groan out loud at the same thing she says to me every time we speak.

"They need me in California, mom." I purposely avoid my father's gaze, because he's the only one who knows that that's a crock of shit. I chose to go to LA because it came at the perfect time for me to escape after everything happened with Morgan. Of course me leaving was probably the stupidest

thing I could have done, but I convinced myself it was what needed to be done. And I've spent the past eleven months regretting it.

“Yeah yeah.” Thankfully, she drops the subject and goes back to prepping dinner while I take a seat at the table with dad. It's another twenty minutes before Juliet finally arrives and we all sit down to eat.

The one thing I've always loved about my parents house, is how low-key it is. It never mattered how much money we had, my folks instilled in Jules and I that money isn't actually what makes you rich. We have plenty of family members who believe that money makes them more important than everyone else. It's why when Juliet found out they were coming to visit for the holidays, she called and begged me to come home so she didn't have to deal with them alone. Of course, I have my own reasons for coming home.

“So Jules, did you want to come with me Friday morning to get ready for the party?” I can't help but chuckle at my mothers question. As humble as she might be, she does love getting dressed up for fancy parties. She goes all out and makes an entire day out of it. Spa, salon, the whole thing.

“That would be fun. I'll see if Morgan wants to do that. I think we were just going to get ready at my place, but a spa is always better.”

I practically choke when I hear her best friend's name, and I try really hard to keep my cool when I ask, “Morgan is coming to the party?”

Of course I knew she would be invited since she's a client. But I figured she wouldn't go, at least not if she knows I'll be there.

“Yes.” The glare my sister gives me makes it very clear that she still hasn't forgiven me for what happened, not that I can blame her. She was hesitant about me starting something with Morgan in the first place. I don't even know if she'll believe me when I tell her the truth. It's something I've gone back and forth on doing. A part of me feels like I should just let it go and allow them both to believe what they do. Then

there's another part of me that still believes that Morgan is the only woman out there for me, and I want to do anything and everything I can to make her believe the truth and forgive me.

Instead of responding to Juliet, I just nod my head a couple times and go back to my cheesy potatoes and pot roast. A plan begins to form in my mind, and as much as I want to get my sister on board with me, I have to figure out exactly how to do that without activating her protective instinct over her best friend. She let her guard down once, I highly doubt she'd do it again without some serious groveling. And knowing my sister, that means I really have my work cut out for me. But if Morgan is the prize? Then I'm up for the challenge.

CHAPTER THREE

Morgan

I look at the clock, surprised with myself at how badly I just want to leave today. I usually love being at my store, it's my happy place. But for some reason, today I'm restless. All I want to do is go home, cuddle on the couch, and watch *Die Hard*. Sure, it may not be your typical Christmas movie, and that's why I love it. I'll sit and watch John McClane kick ass all day, every day.

I look at the time, calculating if I can get away with closing three hours early. There was a time that I never would have even considered closing my store early, but right now I feel so overwhelmed with emotions I'm not even sure I fully understand right now.

Deciding that it's okay for me to take a little time for myself every once in a while, I begin the process of closing by organizing my product, and sweeping the floor. I'm just finishing sweeping up everything off of the floor when the bell over the door rings. As soon as I look up, the dustpan in my hand falls to the floor with a loud crash, causing the trash and dirt in it to go flying everywhere.

"Wh- what are you doing here?" I hate how small and unsure my voice sounds right now. I've worked very hard over the past year to exude the level of confidence needed when you're a curvy girl in this world.

I instinctively step back when Bryce steps further into my shop. My body thrums with a variant of emotions as I try so hard not to let my eyes roam over him and the way his forest green sweater is clinging to his muscular chest and broad shoulders. I don't even have to look to know that his pants are hugging his thighs perfectly because they always do. Of course, looking into his deep green eyes that are only made bright by his sweater, isn't exactly helping my heart rate either. I never understood why Bryce was even interested in me to begin. Though in the end it didn't actually matter, since he proved that I couldn't hold his interest for very long.

"I was hoping we could talk." His deep, gravelly voice has goosebumps popping up all over my skin. I haven't heard his voice in over a year and I hate the reaction I'm having to it. He shouldn't have this power over me. Not anymore.

An all too familiar instinct rises in me at his request, pushing me to give this man anything he asks for. To give in and be the doormat I never realized I was. It's something I spent too many years in the past doing and it's exactly what led me to getting my heart completely shattered last year. I won't let it happen again.

When I open my mouth to give in on pure instinct alone, the memory that flashes in my head luckily has my mouth working in my favor.

"We have nothing to talk about." I quickly look away, not wanting to see the dejected look that crosses his features. He doesn't deserve my sympathy.

"Please, Morg. I want to explain-" His dark hair falls over his forehead when he shifts. It's longer than it was last year, the waves more prominent and only work to really accentuate his sharp jaw and piercing eyes. All of which I do my best to ignore right now.

"You've had a year to explain, Bryce, but you chose not to."

"It's complicated."

“I don’t care.” Without giving him a chance to say anything else, I brush past him, forcing myself not to inhale his familiar scent of mint and spice, and pull the door open. He just stands there staring at me for a moment, so I make a sweeping motion with my hand clearly indicating that it’s time for him to leave.

His mouth opens and closes a couple times, and I wait, expecting him to say something else. Bryce Richardson has never been one to back down when he wants something. After a moment, his mouth closes completely and he shakes his head before walking past me and out of the store.

I let out a long breath, trying not to feel too dejected about the fact that he didn’t fight more. It’s what’s best for me. And like I said, Bryce Richardson has never been one to back down easily when he wants something. Clearly he doesn’t want me. It’s something I learned a year ago, but having it confirmed even after all this time still hurts. It hurts a lot.

I DON’T EVEN RECOGNIZE the person staring back at me. My dark blond hair is flowing down around my shoulders in large curls and the right side is pulled away from my ear and neck, held with a simple diamond studded beret. My make-up is subtle, but the golden hues compliment my skin tone and hazel eyes perfectly.

The last time I was dressed up like this, my plans for the night were much different than they are now. I blink rapidly, warding off the inevitable onslaught of emotions. I won’t do this. I won’t give Bryce the power or opportunity to keep hurting me. I have an amazing life, with or without him.

“Wow!” I turn and see Jules standing by the door of the fancy-as-fuck locker room. When she called me the other day and said we were going to come to the spa with her mom to get ready, I was hesitant for multiple reasons. One being that this place is way out of price range. Yes, the store is doing really well and I’ve managed to be able to start paying myself

a pretty solid salary. But since I refuse to skimp on my products and supplies, I'm still no rockefeller. Of course, I wasn't all that surprised when she said that her mom was paying. This isn't the first time I've come to a place like this with them, but I don't love it when they pay for me. I've learned not to fight them on it, though.

The other reason I was hesitant to come is because I know myself. I know that seeing Bryce tonight, in the familiar setting is going to be hard. Especially since I'm well aware of who else is going to be at the party tonight. I had planned to spend most of the day mentally preparing myself to deal with everything I'm about to face. But Juliet wouldn't let that happen. Even when I was completely honest about it all, she dismissed it with a wave of her hand and told me that I clearly don't know what I need as much as she does. As annoyed as I wanted to be, she's never actually been wrong about things like this. And I'll admit, today has been pretty great. It was nice being pampered and taken care of and not having to worry about a single thing.

"Morg, you look amazing!"

"Thanks." I give her a soft smile, but unease is still swirling in my gut.

"So," she says hesitantly as she steps further into the room. "I don't want you to be upset with me, but I got you this." My eyes narrow slightly as I hone in on the garment bags in her hand. I didn't realize until now that there's two of them, so I assumed it was just her dress for the night. I brought one I had planned on wearing, though I doubt it's as nice as anything she would have bought.

"Jules, I have a dress." My best friend gives me a patient look with an underlying stubbornness that tells me I won't be getting away with that excuse.

"Morg, I love you. But when was the last time you allowed yourself to really indulge in something nice for yourself?" Emotion begins to clog my throat as the truth hits me. I remember perfectly the last time I treated myself to something nice. I had been admiring the dress for weeks and I kept

debating on whether or not I wanted to spend the money because it was much more than I normally would spend. When I finally gave in, I *really* gave in. Buying the right kind of lingerie to go under it and everything. I had the entire night planned out, and I was convinced that it was going to be one of the best nights of my life. *But it wasn't.*

“A year ago.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, a look of regret takes over her features and I know she realizes exactly what I mean.

“Shit, Morgan, I’m so sorry.” I try to wave her off, but I have to look away quickly to keep myself from letting the tears fall. As confident as I try to be, and as much as I say I’m over all of it, I’m not. All my life I’ve been confident and comfortable with who I am. But my confidence was really tested and is still tested daily because of what happened.

“It’s fine, Jules.” I finally get my emotions under control and she seems to realize it because she steps closer and shoves one of the bags into my hand.

“Well, this year, the reason for this dress is completely different.” I look at her with trepidation, but she doesn’t even waver as she continues on. “Not only are you going to make my idiot brother eat his heart out. But you’re going to find yourself a man who’s actually worthy of you and all your amazingness.”

A laugh bursts from my chest and I can’t help but shake my head. I’ve dated plenty in the past. But the men that attend these parties are far from the type that would be interested in me.

“How much hairspray did they use on you? Because I think you might be delusional.”

Jules gives me a stern look, but it still takes a minute for my laughter to settle down.

“You really don’t see it, do you?” she asks.

“See what?” At this point, I’m just humoring her and her delusional ideas.

“How incredible you are. Morgan, you’re a beautiful woman, independent. You own your own business. You’re sassy and funny, and sexy as hell.” It takes everything in me to hold in my eye roll because I know she’s being genuine and I’m not a total jerk. At least not usually.

“I appreciate that, I really do. But the men at these parties aren’t exactly the type I’m interested in.”

“Okay, that’s fair. But nothing says you can’t find someone just for the night. Don’t even try to deny that you could use a good fuck.” Her words resonate through me because she’s right. It’s been too damn long since I’ve had sex and the last time I did, he didn’t even know what he was doing to the point that I faked it just so I could get it over with. It’d be really nice to have an orgasm that I didn’t give to myself.

“Besides,” Jules breaks in again, sounding so damn proud of herself. “If anything can get you laid tonight, it’s going to be this dress.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Morgan

One Year Ago...

I pull in a deep breath as I examine myself one last time in the mirror hanging on the elevator wall. The dress looks really good. It's a deep red, a color I don't normally wear. But it flatters my figure and compliments my dark blond hair really well. The best part is the way it accentuates my cleavage and since it flares out around my thighs, it works really well with my wide hips. I comb my fingers through my hair one more time, trying to show off its natural waviness.

When the elevator dings, it takes a quick internal pep-talk to get my legs moving and for me to step off.

This past month with Bryce has been a whirlwind. To say I was shocked when he confessed his feelings for me, would be an understatement. Having the man I'd been crushing on for years tell me that he was in love with me was a dream I never even imagined coming true. But it did. Every time he would kiss me or hold my hand so sweetly, my insecurities would melt away and my confidence would grow more and more. He hasn't pushed me for more, and as much as I love and appreciate it, I'm so done waiting.

Which is why I finally bit the bullet and bought the dress I've been drooling over for weeks now. Along with it, I purchased some lingerie that I normally would never wear.

Bryce is a millionaire. Millionaires like fancy lingerie and nice dresses.

I walk down the hall, my steps slow but steady as I make my way to Bryce's apartment at the end of the hall. The hallway seems so much shorter than normal, probably because I'm trying to buy myself time but I can't. Once I'm in front of Bryce's door, I take a few more slow and steadying breaths before I pull out my keys, finding the one Bryce gave me last week but I've yet to use.

As soon as I open the door, the site in front of me has my entire body turning to ice.

Bryce, the man I love, the man I thought loved me, is standing in the middle of his living room wrapped in nothing but a towel and a blonde.

Natalia, the girl I've basically hated since high school, has her arms wrapped around Bryce's neck and her lipstick is clearly covering his cheek.

She sees me before he does, and her entire demeanor changes. Her facial expression becomes hard and malicious and her lips turn up into an evil grin.

"Oh, hi Morgan." At her words, Bryce's entire body turns to me and I watch as both shock and guilt play across his face.

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I'm stunned speechless at the betrayal. I never thought this would happen. Sure, in the beginning I had my doubts. But over the past week, the fear had begun to melt away with Bryce's reassurance.

"Morgan-" The sound of my name coming from him snaps me out of my stupor. I shake my head, still unable to form words. So I don't even try. Without giving him a chance to say anything else, I turn on my heels and book it out of his apartment. I'm aware of Bryce's heavy footsteps following behind me, but I don't slow down. I keep running, even if my feet are protesting in my much too tall heels that I thought would be sexy tonight.

Bryce continuously calls my name, and once I make it to the elevator I stab the call button over and over again while trying to fight back the tears. My eyes snap to the door off to the side that leads to the stairs. Bryce's footsteps grow louder and so does the sound of him calling my name. Just as I'm about to give up and take the stairs, the heavens come alive for me and the elevator doors slide open. I all but throw myself inside and immediately start slamming my finger on the button to close the door. My breathing begins to come out in heavy pants and the tears begin to break through as I watch Bryce get closer and closer to the elevator. Just as he starts to get close enough to reach out to me, the doors slide close, shutting him off and closing me inside the elevator alone.

I lean back against the wall, suddenly feeling completely exhausted. I guess I really shouldn't be all that surprised by this. In the beginning, I kept wondering why Bryce would be interested in me. He's a guy who's dated models. Hell, Natalia, the platinum blonde that was in his apartment, was his most recent girlfriend. He told me they were long over, but clearly that wasn't true. Maybe I was just a ploy to get her back. It wouldn't be the first time I was used. I just thought Bryce wasn't that kind of guy. Clearly I was wrong.

A part of me expects to see Bryce emerge from the stairwell when I make it to the lobby. Of course that doesn't happen.

I make it back to my apartment, and the moment the door closes behind me, an onslaught of emotions I was trying to hold back hits me. I barely manage to make it to the couch before I finally allow myself to do what I've wanted to since the moment I walked into Bryce's apartment tonight. I cry.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bryce

I hate these types of parties. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with people getting together and having a good time. But the whole point of these types of parties in particular, is to schmooze. That's the only reason all of my father's extended family even comes to visit. They know damn well that these things are important for the bank as a whole. So even though most of them have nothing to do with the business on a regular day, this is when they put on a fake smile and pretend like they actually know what's going on. Which they really don't.

My aunt Caroline, Dad's sister, was more than happy to give up her active role in the bank years ago. As long as her bank account keeps filling and her voting privilege from sitting on the board stays intact, she's fine.

Yet right now, she's standing in the middle of the party, laughing way too loud at something Hayden Frost, one of our biggest clients just said. And judging by the look on his face, whatever he just said wasn't meant to be funny.

I force back the eye roll that so badly wants to escape, and turn away from that disaster. Just like they have all night, my eyes find the gate that's serving as tonight's entry to the party. Even I have to admit that Fitzzy did a damned good job at making this place *not* look like an apartment complex. The pool has a clear cover over it, but beneath it you can see

floating poinsettias and tea lights making a beautiful glow. The fence is wrapped in twinkle lights and red, silver, and green ornaments. It's just enough of a Christmas theme to be festive, but not too over the top that it's still classy enough for a party thrown by one of the most high end banks in the world. The waiters are dressed in all white, except for the Santa hats on their heads. Christmas music is playing softly from the speakers, loud enough to be heard, but soft enough to not impede on conversations. Everyone is glamorously dressed head-to-toe. The amount of diamond at this party could easily blind a person if put side-by-side.

A heavy hand clapping down on my shoulder pulls me from my thoughts and I turn to face my father. He may be in his sixties, but he doesn't look. It's gotten pretty damn annoying over the years, having people constantly mistake us for brothers. But the man takes care of himself and it shows. It also helps that he's a good person through and through. I've never seen anyone love another the way my father loves my mother.

"You doing okay, son?" His Texas drawl is often hard to miss. Unlike the rest of his family who did their best to shed their accents the moment they left the state for more glamorous locations such as New York or Paris. They only allow them to show during events like these because they think it's *charming*. Dad has never tried to deny who he is, or where he's from. It probably helps that he was always the closest to his grandfather, who never hid exactly what he came from. Which was nothing. My grandfather was quick to forget his roots the moment the trust fund and taking over the family business kicked in. Dad didn't care about the money. He cared about family. Just like his grandpa.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"You've been watching that gate all night. For some reason, I don't think it's your sister you're waiting on."

Mom arrived at the party with dad, and as casual as I tried to be when I asked where Juliet was, I knew I wasn't fooling either of my parents. Luckily, mom felt like humoring me and casually replied that she'd be coming later with Morgan. Just

hearing her name, and knowing we'll be in the same place again had excitement bubbling inside of me.

I'm still not sure what I was planning when I went to her store, This and That, yesterday. I just had to see her. I knew it would be better not to go there. I knew that giving her space and waiting for tonight would be best. But I also knew that seeing her for the first time in a year at a party with all of my stuck up family and clients wasn't exactly the best idea. So I decided to rip off the bandaid early.

I open my mouth to respond to dad, but the telltale sign of the gate opening and a commotion of greetings pulls my attention back to the entrance.

My heart stutters in my chest when I see my sister, then it stops completely when I see who walks in right behind her.

Morgan is the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes on. She's a real woman, with real curves. Her dark blue eyes, and perfect bow mouth has every man salivating over her. Yet somehow, I was lucky enough for her to choose me. For some reason I still don't understand, she decided she wanted me. Yet I was so fucking scared, I blew it.

"You gonna tell her?" Dad's words startle me from my trance, making my body jerk slightly. When I reluctantly move my gaze from Morgan and back to my father, there's something in his eyes I'm not quite sure I understand.

"Tell her what?"

"The truth." I open my mouth to reply, but when no words come out, I close it again. He's looking at me with so much sincerity and not an ounce of judgment. I want to ask what truth, but it's obvious what he's talking about. I figured my entire family believed that I cheated on Morgan. It actually killed me how easily most people *did* seem to believe it.

"How- how did you know?" His gaze bores into me, so intently that I almost shift under the scrutiny, but I force myself not to cower down at all.

"I know you, son. And I know how much you love that girl. I don't know why you allowed her to believe you did that,

and I'm sure you have your reasons. But I also see how unhappy you've been this past year."

I shake my head, my mind still reeling from the fact that he knows the truth. "She can do better than me."

"You're right," he responds quickly, and I try not to take it too personally. "She can do better than you. But just because she can, doesn't mean she wants to. She chose you, Bryce. And you'd just be doing the both of you a disservice if you didn't at least try to set the record straight and give the two of you a fighting chance."

Before I even have the chance to allow my brain to compute everything dad just said to me, he walks away leaving me completely dumbfounded. I already knew he was right, but I can't seem to get my damn thoughts straight. I want Morgan. Hell, I love Morgan and I want to be with her. But I also know just how hard being with me can be. I don't know if she ever actually saw the article that was printed about us, but the last thing I ever want is for her to have to go through that kind of humiliation again.

I turn back to the entrance, but Morgan and Juliet are no longer near it. My eyes surf over the sea of people, squinting slightly from the bright, glittering lights. I begin to walk through the crowd, searching every face I see, looking for the only one I actually want to see. I'm pulled into a few conversations and start a couple myself since I know I'm technically here to work and to make our clients feel appreciated. It's another twenty minutes before I make to the other side of the party and the moment I do, my attention is immediately drawn to the bar when Morgan is standing, in the sexiest fucking dress I've ever seen in my life. She throws her head back and laughs at something, making her entire body light up with excitement. It's only then that I allow my gaze to slide to the person she's talking to, and unfortunately it's not my sister. Nope. Morgan is sipping on a glass of champagne and talking to some with dark hair that's pulled back into a neatly kept bun. They're both smiling at each other from ear-to-ear and it doesn't take a genius to see the interest in Morgan's body language. *Fuck.*

CHAPTER SIX

Morgan

I should be feeling... *something* right now. This guy is absolutely gorgeous and as far as I can tell, incredibly nice. There should be some sort of internal reaction to his attractiveness and attentiveness. But there's nothing. All I can seem to focus on is keeping my gaze right here so I don't accidentally end up staring at Bryce.

"So, can I get you another?" The guy I'm talking to, Deacon, motions to my empty champagne glass and I quickly nod. I don't usually drink this much, but I knew when I arrived that the only way I would manage to get through this night is with a lot of help from my good friend Dom.

Deacon gives me an incredibly sexy smile, though it does seem to be lacking something. I can't quite put my finger on it. It's a genuine smile, but not at the same time. He motions for the bartender and within a minute he's being handed a fresh glass. He turns back to me, handing me the glass, though I don't miss the way his gaze keeps flicking to the other side of the pool. When I follow his line of sight, my breath practically stalls in my lungs. If I thought Deacon was attractive with his hair pulled back into a neat bun and the casual suit hugging his body perfectly, the man staring back at him is downright sinful. I've been a sucker for the more clean cut look, and this guy is rocking that look beautifully. With his short dark hair and even darker gaze. The suit he's wearing is a lot more

refined than what Deacon is wearing, but it doesn't look ostentatious in the least.

My attention draws back to the man next to me, who's smirking into his glass as he slowly pulls his eyes from the other man. I'm not sure what that's all about, but I suddenly feel as if I'm intruding on an intimate moment.

Thankfully, it's that moment that Fitzzy, the owner of the complex and town's resident busy-body decides to make her way over. Apparently Deacon has some sense of self-preservation, because he quickly excuses himself with one last smile before practically sprinting away. I don't blame the man. Fitzzy is one of the kindest, most generous people I know. But her favorite past-time besides hosting parties is meddling in everyone's business. It's exhausting.

"Oh Morgan, you look lovely!" A genuine smile tugs at my lips because Fitzzy really is one of my favorite people. She comes into my shop regularly and she's often on my mind any time I'm making new products or thinking about new consignment offers. She has a unique style, and I love that about her.

"Thank you-" I barely get the words out before Juliet's aunt Caroline comes over, and a sense of dread washes over me. As much as I love Juliet's parents and even grandparents, I genuinely cannot stand the rest of her family.

"Morgan, dear, you look... nice." I force back my eyeroll, because unlike Fitzzy's compliment to me, this one lacks any genuine truth and warmth.

"Doesn't she?" Fitzzy jumps in and I swear I could kiss her. "I was just telling her how incredible this dress looks on her. Bryce can eat his heart out." My smile threatens to falter for a moment, but I manage to maintain my confidence. That is until I see Caroline's fake pitying look as she clicks her tongue and shakes her head. Caroline never liked the idea of Bryce and I together. No one knows it, but last year, I overheard a conversation she was having with someone, telling them how pathetic it was that I thought I would be able to hold onto a man like Bryce. At the moment, I didn't agree with her. I was

so confident that Bryce really was in love with me, that I just ignored everything she was saying.

“It really is a shame that things didn’t work out between the two of you. But it’s for the better, really. He and Natalia are just the most beautiful couple.” Bile begins to form in my throat as she keeps talking. I guess I shouldn’t be all that surprised that Bryce and Natalia are together now. Juliet never said anything, but we don’t talk about her brother all that much. I figured it was always to protect me, now I know that really is the reason. “I’m just waiting for the wedding announcement-”

“Oh please!” Fitzy interrupts Caroline’s inconsiderate ramblings. “You know damn well that Bryce and Natalia aren’t together. The little harlot ran off to New York to be with that Wall Street guy she tricked into dating her eight months ago.”

My body freezes and my mind begins to race with the knowledge Fitzy just dropped. I knew Natalia moved not long after Bryce did. Again, I tried not to think too much of it at the time, assuming that they were together, but not confirming it.

“Well,” Caroline tries to speak some more, but Fitzy stops her again.

“Bryce and Natalia were never even together and you know as well as I do that he never cheated either. It was a misunderstanding that was made worse by you.”

I watch in complete awe as Caroline opens and closes her mouth over and over, making her look like a confused and lost fish. As entertaining as it would normally, I’m too laser focused on the revelation that pretty much just rocked my world.

I open my mouth to ask for clarification, because there’s no way I heard her correctly. If Bryce never actually cheated on me, then why didn’t he say something? Why didn’t he come after me and tell me the truth? Why did he let me leave that night? But before I can manage to get my mouth to form the words, we’re interrupted by my best friend.

“Everything okay over here?” Caroline quickly nods her head and gives Jules a fake smile. I want to say something, to ask if everything Fitzy just said is true, but I still can’t seem to form words. I slowly move my gaze to Juliet who’s looking at me with concern written all over her face. “Morg?”

As if he’s summoning me, my eyes move to the other side of the pool, finding Bryce staring right at me. I’m locked in his intense gaze, no way to escape as every nerve cell in my body comes alive with need and desire. Without a word to the three other women with me, my legs begins moving on their own volition toward the man who’s deep brown eyes are holding me hostage. And for the first time in a long time, I don’t think I mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bryce

*T*rack Morgan as she makes her way through the glittering crowd, her gaze holding mine in a way I've longed for for the past year. I'm mesmerized by the way the lacey black dress is clinging to her curves in the most enticing way. The dress is unlike anything I've seen her wear before. In the past, she always chose things that were slightly looser, especially around her waist and hips. But this dress. This dress accentuates every single one of her perfect features. Her wide, gripable hips. Her thighs, that are just begging to be wrapped around me. And the way her cleavage is practically spilling out of the low cut front has me salivating to taste her. Every inch of her.

Morgan walks to me slowly, but with purpose, and I can't help but wonder what exactly the conversation she was having with my aunt and Fitzzy just entailed. There's a new kind of determination in her eyes as she draws closer and I realize that I'm holding my breath, completely unsure about what's going to happen.

"Why did you let me believe it?" The first words out of Morgan's mouth has my body stilling and my gaze cutting back across the pool to where Juliet is looking back at us with wide concerned eyes, Fitzzy is wearing a smirk that clearly says she was hoping this would happen, and Caroline just looks downright annoyed. I ignore all three of them, knowing that

the only woman that should have my attention right now is standing right in front of me.

“Because I thought it would be best for you.” My excuse sounds even more stupid now when I say it out loud. Dad was right, I’ve been miserable the past year and it’s obvious that me playing the martyr only hurt both of us more.

“Why? Because there were other women?”

I shake my head emphatically. “No. Only you.”

She stares at me for a moment, then shakes her head in irritation. “Is this about that stupid news article?”

I’m sure the shock on my face is making me look ridiculous, but I don’t even care. “You read it?”

“Of course I read it. Natalia sent it to me the moment it was published. Along with at least half a dozen other mean girls from high school.” She rolls her eyes, and I can’t help the way my lips fight to smile. “I didn’t care about what it said, Bryce. About me, about us. I didn’t care.”

She shakes her head, the hurt and disappointment embedded in her body language has my blooming smile falling again. “None of that mattered. All that mattered was us, you. What you thought of me. You made me feel special, then you-”

She cuts herself off, probably because she realized that her voice was beginning to rise, and we’re still at the party.

Without giving it too much thought, not wanting to risk her rejecting me, I step forward, putting us toe-to-toe. I wrap my arm around her waist and tug her closer.

“I was stupid.”

“Yeah, you were.” There’s still a bite in her tone, but the added breathiness to her voice has my confidence growing.

“I should have told you the truth.” She nods. “I should have gone after you, even after you got on the elevator.” Another nod.

Someone bumps into my back, pushing me harder against Morgan. As much as I love the closeness, this isn't exactly the setting I would prefer for what I'm hoping is our reconciliation.

“Can we talk? Privately?”

She glances around the party, her eyes flitting over the crowd. I wait with bated breath as I watch different thoughts and emotions shadow across her face.

Finally, she looks me in the eyes and gives me a sharp nod. With no further hesitation, I step back and grab her hand, and with hurried steps I guide her away from the party toward my apartment.

ONE YEAR AGO...

“BRYCE, NATALIA CALLED AGAIN.” I don't bother smothering my frustrated groan when I step out of my office and am greeted by Pat's words. Judging by the bite in her tone, it's safe to assume that Natalia was just as pleasant as she always is. Which is not at all.

I don't have very many regrets in life, but out of the few that I do have, Natalia is definitely one of them. She and I dated for a very brief stint a few months ago when I was still trying to deny my feelings for Morgan. Maybe deny isn't the right word, I was just afraid to admit them, because if anyone has the power to hurt me, it's Morgan. After three whole dates with Natalia, I realized that being with Morgan and risking getting my heartbroken, was a much better option. Of course, Natalia is the type of woman who has never been dumped in her life, so she hasn't exactly been taking it well. She usually calls my office at least three times a day, her text messages arrive pretty much on the hour, and she's even shown up here and at my apartment a few times since I told her we were over. I've already begun looking for a new place to live because I just can't deal with it anymore. Not to mention I plan to ask Morgan to move in with me tonight, and I really don't think

she would appreciate having another woman showing up at all hours of the night.

“What did you tell her?”

“That you were busy.” Pat shrugs her shoulders, then a sneaky smirk starts to pull at her lips. “I may have insinuated that your girlfriend was here, if you get my drift.”

I bark out a loud laugh, because if anything send Natalia over the edge, it’s going to be thinking that I was having sex with Morgan in my office. Especially since Natalia has tried to convince me to do that with her more than once. We never had sex at all, let alone in my office.

“You get a raise.” Pat smirks at me, and a wave of warmth rolls through me. Pat has been like a grandmother figure to me for years. She went to school with my grandpa and began working for him when he first began expanding the company. Pat was one of the only people who believed in Grandpa’s vision and stood by him as he built his empire.

“You heading out for the night?” Pat gives me a wink when she asks, and I can’t help but roll my eyes at her.

“Yep. Morgan is coming over when she closes the store.”

“Are you asking her tonight?” I don’t give her a verbal confirmation, only smiling which very clearly shows my answer. Pat’s the only person I told when I decided to ask Morgan to move in with me. And the only reason I did that was because she wouldn’t stop asking questions about why I was meeting with a realtor.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.” *Though I really hope I don’t need it.*

I GLANCE at the time just as I’m pulling up in front of my apartment building. I have a little less than an hour before Morgan will be here, which is just enough time for me to get everything ready then take a quick shower.

I rush through getting everything set up. I’ve never been what I would consider romantic, but if anyone deserves it from

me, it's Morgan. So I haul the flowers Pat picked up for me earlier into my apartment and set up the candles I keep in the hall closet. It may not be anything over-the-top, but it's perfect for my woman. Morgan isn't the type to want some flashy, insane declaration. Some flowers, candlelight, and soft music is right up her alley.

Once I'm satisfied with the way everything looks, I make sure the door's unlocked. Morgan has a key, but it's like she refuses to use it. She always knocks when she comes over, so I've started just leaving the door unlocked so she can walk right in.

I jump in the shower and hurry through my routine, adding a little extra time in the manscaping department. If this all goes the way I hope it will, I want to make sure everything is presentable.

Just as I'm finishing up, I hear the front door open and my heart rate picks up a few notches. I shut off the water and wrap a towel around my waist, not bothering to get dressed yet. I don't want to leave Morgan alone too long wondering what's going on.

But the second I step out into the living room, both irritation and anger hits me like a damn freight train. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Natalia turns on her heels from where she was scrutinizing the items I have laid out on the kitchen table. The way her eyes roam over me with hunger has me squirming uncomfortably. I never actually liked Natalia. But when I was trying to deny my true feelings for Morgan, she was always just around. So it made it easy to use her in my attempts. Was it messed up? Yes. But Natalia isn't exactly what most would consider a good person, so I don't actually feel bad about it.

"I came to see you, of course." It's actually kind of disturbing how casual she sounds right now. Like I should have totally been expecting her.

"You need to leave. Right now." I glance at the time on my oven and I realize that Morgan is going to be here any second.

The last thing I need, tonight of all nights, is for her to walk in on Natalia, her high school bully, in my fucking living room.

“Why would I do that?” My irritation grows even more, because I know she’s doing this shit on purpose.

“Seriously, Natalia. I don’t even know why you’re here. You know damn well I’m with Morgan now.” She scoffs, like me being with Morgan, or someone else at all, is just a giant joke.

“You made your point, Bryce.”

“What point is that exactly?”

“I know you’ve only been using Morgan to try and make me jealous. If I admit I’m jealous, can we just stop this game?” I can’t decide if I should laugh or scream at her complete lack of self-awareness. I open my mouth to respond, to tell her that she’s completely cracked, but before I get the chance, she launches herself at me. She throws her arms around my neck and leans in to kiss me. Of course, it’s that very moment, the worst possible moment in the entire fucking world, that Morgan walks in.

The shock and pain that immediately morphs her features breaks my heart right then and there. Without a single word, she turns and runs out of my apartment. I give no thought to the fact that I’m only in a towel when I try to run after her, but she’s determined and that seems to make her steps even faster. I call out to her, begging her to stop, but she doesn’t slow down. Apparently someone really hates me, because even when she calls for the elevator it opens immediately and I get to them right as the doors close, successfully keeping me away from her.

“Fuck!”

I rush back to my apartment, and my anger meter shoots to a million when I find Natalia leaning against my table with a wicked smirk on her face.

“Well, that was unfortunate.”

I glare at her, but otherwise ignore her as I rush to my bedroom and pull out some underwear, a t-shirt, and sweats

from my drawers. I quickly get dressed and unfortunately when I get back to the living room, Natalia is still here.

“Why the fuck are you still here?”

She doesn't answer, which doesn't surprise me. Natalia is just delusional enough to think that I actually want her here. I turn my back to her, finding my shoes and rushing to put them on. My mind is already running through the possibilities of where Morgan went. I doubt she went home, she's smarter than that. If she doesn't want me to find her, she'll go somewhere else. I'm already working up the plea I know I'll have to give my sister when I show up at her door, when Natalia's obnoxious, pretentious voice breaks in.

“I never thought you to be cruel.”

I spin on her, officially sick of her bullshit. “I'm cruel? You're the one who showed up here like this when you know damn well I'm with Morgan now!”

“The fact that you're willing to subject her to this kind of scrutiny-” Her words break off as she shakes her head and pulls her phone out. She opens something on it, then shoves it in my face. What I see in front of me, everything I'm reading has my veins turning to ice. I only skim over the words, but it's enough to have bile rising in my throat.

BRYCE RICHARDSON DATING overweight store owner.

Bryce Richardson trades down from Natalia Smith.

Bryce Richardson dating beneath him.

THE DIFFERENT HEADLINES have my stomach swooping and my heart breaking in my chest. I really hope Morgan hasn't seen these. Fuck, what would she think? She's the most beautiful woman in the world, and these fuckers can't seem to see that fact. The things that are written are just plain sick and cruel.

“She’s not cut out for this life, Bryce.” Natalia’s statement has been flinching, but I know she’s right. Morgan is too sweet for this bullshit. These stories are only the tip of the iceberg. It’s clear that they don’t know who she is. If we stay together, it’ll only be a matter of time before they all figure it out. Once they do, nothing will be safe. Not Morgan, not her store, not our relationship. We’ll live in the spotlight of public scrutiny and that’s just not fair to her.

I turn back and glare at Natalia, practically throwing her phone back at her. “Get out. Now.”

Maybe it’s the clear anger in my voice, or the fact that she obviously accomplished what she came here to do. But surprisingly Natalia doesn’t argue again and leaves my apartment in silence. My mind is spinning with everything and as much as I want to go after Morgan, as much as I feel the need to go after her, I know I can’t. There’s not a single doubt in my mind that Morgan is the love of my life. Which is exactly why I need to let her go. I may not be in headlines that often, but people care just enough to keep me relevant. I’m not a famous celebrity or anything like that, but I’m rich. And unfortunately in today’s world, that’s all people give a shit about.

I stumble to the couch, hating the aching pain that just keeps growing in my chest. Letting Morgan go is the last thing I want to do. But I love her enough to know that it’s exactly what I *need* to do. *Fuck, this hurts.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Morgan

*M*y hand is encased in Bryce's strong grip and the familiarity of it all is bringing me both comfort and excitement. I glance over to where Juliet is still standing with Fitzzy. I don't know where Caroline went, but I'm sure she wasn't happy to see the scene that went down between Bryce and I. Fitzzy has a wide satisfied smile on her face, while Juliet looks conflicted. She looks excited, but also apprehensive. I can understand that. She's always been my biggest cheerleader and my protector. She also loves her brother. She doesn't want to see either of us hurt.

Instead of focusing on my best friend's concern, I keep my gaze on Bryce's strong back as he leads me through the party. I watch the way his muscles ripple under his suit jacket, and the way it clings tightly to his shoulders. Everything's happening so quickly, yet I'm not scared or concerned. I want this. For the first time in a year I'm allowing myself to admit it. I want this, I want him. I'm not going to pretend like what he did is okay, but I will admit that it's better than him actually cheating on me. I'm not surprised that Natalia made me believe that it really did happen, but that fact that Bryce allowed me to believe it is what stings the most.

I shake those thoughts away, wanting to live in this moment as we weave through the crowd of glitz and glamor.

It only takes us a couple minutes until we reach his apartment and he's unlocking the door and pulling me inside. The moment the door is slammed shut behind us, Bryce has me pinned to the wall and my breathing begins to come out in heavy pants when I see the dark look of desire in his eyes.

I open my mouth to say something, but before I can get a word out, his lips are on mine. They crash together and before I can process what's happening, we're nothing but a blur of teeth and tongue, and hands everywhere.

"Fuck, Morgan." Bryce grits out against my lips. "This dress." His hand grips the bottom hem of my dress while the other rests against the hem at my cleavage. "This fucking dress has been torturing me all fucking night. Your body is perfection and I hated knowing that every man at that party was lusting after you and picturing themselves ripping it from your body."

I want to argue with him on that matter, but he grazes his teeth down my neck and all words are lost on my lips. I let out a long needy moan, which only seems to spur him on. He bites down at the junction between my neck and shoulder as he grinds his hips against me, showing me just how much he wants me right now.

"Bryce," I breathe out.

"Fuck!" He pulls back, letting me see his face. Though he's encased in shadows, I can still see the desire that's taking over his features. "I've been dying to hear my name on your lips for so long now, baby. It's my favorite sound in the entire world." He leans in and kisses me again, it's a rough, punishing kiss and I cling to his shoulders, desperately needing something to hold onto. Bryce's tongue demands entry into my mouth and I willingly, eagerly, comply. He bites down roughly on my lip and stars dance in my vision and I let out another groan of need.

When Bryce rips his mouth from mine, I whine in protest. That is until he drops down to his knees without any preemptive and slides my dress up over my hips.

“I need you, Morgan. I need to taste you.” I go to lift my leg to help him remove my underwear, but before I get the chance, I hear a loud tear and then an assault of cool air hits me. I’m about to yell at him for ripping it, when he could have just slid them down, but before I get the chance he dives right in. Bryce lifts my right leg, resting it on his shoulder and uses his thumbs to open me for him, giving him access to lick up one side to the other. His tongue flicks at my clit, and I throw my head back as my vision becomes hazy and non-sense leaves my mouth. My hands fly to his hair and grips tightly as Bryce continues licking and sucking and biting. When he slides a single finger in, I cry out his name. The different sensations cause my legs to quiver and if it wasn’t for him using his strength to hold me up, I know I would fall to the ground in a puddle of need. He keeps going, giving me everything I didn’t even know I needed. And when he adds a second finger and curls them forward, hitting me in just the right spot. That, combined with him biting down just right on my clit, Stars dance behind my eyelids and I completely come undone.

It takes a couple minutes for my body to calm down, and only then does Bryce lower my leg to the ground and stand back up. His gaze is laser focused on me if I thought there was desire in his eyes before, now it’s pure lust and need. He grips onto the side of my neck and kisses me. When his tongue slides in my mouth, I can taste myself on him and it’s possibly the sexiest thing I’ve ever tasted.

Without breaking the kiss, he grips my hips and lifts me off the ground as if I weigh nothing. I’ve never been the kind of woman who needed to feel small or fragile. I’ve always had a body, and curves that went with it. But being with Bryce, somehow has always made me feel more feminine. Maybe because he’s the first I’ve ever been with who truly enjoyed my body. We’ve never had sex before, but we did plenty that showed me how much he like my curves. Whatever the reason, it’s always been a heady feeling and something I could easily grow accustomed to.

When we get to his bedroom, I expect him to toss me on his bed and be just as rough with me in here as he was in the

doorway. But to my surprise, Bryce gently sets me down on his bed and looks at me with a new kind of softness. This isn't the same look he gave me before he went down on me. This is a look of lust and desire, but with a blanket of something else, something more. Love.

He crawls over me on the bed, kissing his way up my body. My dress is still on, but it's as if he doesn't care. He kisses me through the thin material, and somehow the heat from his mouth still sears my skin. He licks a path across my chest before gliding his tongue up my neck and across my jaw, then kissing me slowly and sensually.

"I've missed you so much, baby." There's an emotion in his voice that causes my chest to warm and I can feel my throat tightening with emotion.

"I've missed you too."

He kisses me again, as his hands roam over my body. I'm about to suggest we lose our clothes when once again, I hear a loud rip and my entire body becomes exposed. I can't help the gasp that escapes, especially when Bryce looks at me with a bright, satisfied smile on his face.

"Did you just rip my dress!?"

CHAPTER NINE

Bryce

The look of appallment on Morgan's face would have me laughing my ass off, if I wasn't so damn turned on right now. Her entire body is flushed pink and she's practically trembling with need and desire. I've dreamed of this moment happening between us for so long, and over the past year I've managed to convince myself that it would never happen. Now, having her here, under me, needy for me. It's a big deal. It's a gift that I won't take for granted. Not ever again.

"Yep." It's the only answer I give her as I climb off the bed and slowly begin to remove my own clothes. I can see the war in her eyes. She wants to be angry. A part of her may even want to leave. But she doesn't. I have no doubt that dress was expensive, but if that's the issue, then I'll buy her a new one. Hell, I'll buy her a million dresses if it means I can rip them off of her body, because that was fucking hot.

"Jules bought me that dress." There's not a lot of conviction behind her words, but I don't want to be a total jackass.

"I'll pay her back, and buy you a new one." Her lips part, and I know she's about to say something, but she suddenly stops. Her eyes are focused on my chest and stomach as I unbutton my shirt. I slow my pace just to tease her, but when a look of impatience crosses her features, I decide I don't want

to press my luck and move quicker. Once I'm out of my clothes, I take a moment to really admire the woman laying before me.

Morgan's perfect curves are on display as her hair is fanned out on my pillow making her almost look like an angel. Though she may look like an angel, her body was made for sin. Her eyes roam over my body the way mine are hers, and when her gaze zeroes in on my dick, that's ready to fucking explode, I can't hold back any longer.

Unlike when we first walked into my apartment, I have every intention of taking things slow and savoring this next step. I've been with women. Plenty of women if I'm being honest. But I've never been with Morgan, not like this, and I know that it's going to be a completely different experience. I climb on the bed, one knee at a time. Then I grab hold of one of her shapely legs, placing kisses from the ankle and creating a path up her calf and thigh until I reach her upper thigh enticingly close to where I was just a few minutes ago. I stop, gently placing her leg back on the mattress and reach for her other one. I watch for a moment and her chest rises and falls with quick pace. Her eyes are closed tight and her lips slightly parted and as soft breaths escape in huffs. I repeat my path on this leg before dropping it back down and kissing from one hip bone to the other. I have no intention of leaving any part of this woman untouched or unkissed tonight. I create a path up her stomach and when I reach her perfect chest, I give each of her voluptuous tits the attention they both deserve. I relish the sounds falling from Morgan's lips as I kiss and suck and bite.

"Bryce, please." I skim my nose over her collarbone and up her neck before placing my lips next to her ear.

"What do you need, baby? Tell me what you need and you'll have it."

"I need you."

I kiss the shell of her ear. "You have me."

"I need you inside me." It's as if her words ignite a stick of dynamite inside of me. Without anymore thought, I slam my lips down onto her. Our tongues tangle together as I blindly

reach into my nightstand drawer for a condom. When my fingers brush against a foil packet, I grab it and place on the bed next to us. I cup her face in my hands as I put my weight on my elbows. Morgan's legs wrap around my hips, lining my cock up perfectly against her pussy.

"I love you, baby. You know that?" I pull back enough for her to look me in the eyes. I watch for a moment as she seemingly works through her internal thoughts. I don't blame her for the hesitance. It's to be expected after everything I put her through. I hold my breath, waiting to see what she'll say or do. When her legs tighten around my hips and her arms wind around my neck, I let out a relieved sigh.

"I love you too."

Not willing to waste anymore time, I grab the condom and make quick work sheathing myself. The entire time, I watch Morgan, searching for any indication of doubt. But she seems just as ready and eager as I am. So without much more preemptive, I line myself up at her entrance and when I lean down to kiss her, I slide in. The moment I'm fully seated, my entire body freezes and stars dance in my eyes.

"Fuck, Morgan."

"Bryce!" I always knew making love to this woman would be special, but I had no fucking idea that it would feel like an out of body experience. She tightens around me, practically strangling my dick and I don't even recognize my own voice when a low, strangled moan escapes.

I slowly begin to pull out, and when only the tip is inside, I slam back in, stealing the breath for both myself and Morgan.

I begin thrusting in and out in earnest, desperate to make this last, but also needing to cum more than I need my next breath. With every heavy slam, her pussy tightens around me, telling me that she's just as close as I am. I reach my hand between us, pinching her clit between my fingers at the same time I lean down and take one of her nipples in my mouth and bite down. Her body arches up, she slams her head back against the pillow, and she cries out just as her thighs begin to shake and her whole body trembles in waves. When her pussy

begins to pulse around me, I can't even attempt to hold back. I piston in and out of her in uneven strokes before slamming in one last time and stilling as my spine begins to tingle and my balls draw up.

I stay on top of her, doing my best not to give her all of my weight as we both pull in heavy, uneven breaths. I can feel Morgan's heart pounding against my own and there's something so fucking sexy and sensual about the way that even when the rhythms are heavy and all over the place, they're still somehow in sync.

I brush my lips across hers, and I fucking love the way her mouth tries to follow mine when I pull away. I love knowing that even after all of our time apart, she's still desperate for me the way I am for her.

I slowly pull out of her, but instead of climbing off the bed, I just collapse on the bed next to Morgan. When I turn my head to look at her, she's looking back at me with the brightest smile on her face, causing my heart to squeeze. But it's not the smile that completely does me in, it's the look in her eyes. Her crystal eyes are looking at me with an expression I never thought I would see from her again. *Pure, unconfined love.*

CHAPTER TEN

Bryce

The next morning, I wake up with a warm body pressed against me and the dopey smile that pulls at my lips is uncontrollable. Happiness blooms in my chest as the memories from last night flood my brain. I've only ever been able to dream about what it would be like to make love to Morgan, and the reality of it far surprised the fantasies.

Without disturbing her, I quietly climb from my bed and make my way to the kitchen. I've only eaten out since I've gotten back to town, so I'm not surprised that I have absolutely no food to cook up for breakfast. I pull up one of my many food delivery apps and find somewhere that's still serving breakfast. I order a bunch of different things since I'm not sure exactly what Morgan will be in the mood for. She's always been what she refers to as a mood eater. She has to see something in order to decide if it's what she wants. I've always had a large appetite, so I'm more than happy to eat whatever she doesn't.

I submit the order, then send off another quick text just as I hear the telltale sound of someone rising from my bed and footsteps padding down the hallway. I send a silent thank you to whoever is listening when Morgan appears in nothing but the thin sheet from my bed, messy hair from my fingers being tangled in it all night, and a sated smile.

“Good morning.” Her voice is still raspy and sexy as hell from sleep, and my dick immediately pays attention.

“Good morning, beautiful. Breakfast is on its way.” I wrap my arms around her waist and when my lips find hers, she immediately melts into me.

“Do you have to work today?” For the past year, I’ve basically been working seven days a week. It’s been the best way for me to not think about how lonely I’ve been, or how much I’ve missed this woman. But in reality, I don’t actually have to work on Saturdays. Though there is something important I need to do.

“I have to go in for a little bit, but it shouldn’t take more than an hour or two.” She nods in understanding, and I’m an asshole for the fact that I enjoy the look of disappointment on her face.

“What time are you opening the store?” Her eyes widen and her body stiffens, almost as if she forgot she owned a business. I chuckle and tighten my arms around her. “Don’t worry babe, it’s only nine-thirty.”

She visibly relaxes back into me and lets out a long breath. “I open at eleven.”

I get a notification on my phone that our food is out for delivery, so Morgan decides to take a quick shower. Just as I hear the water turn on, the buzzer on my door goes off. It’s not the food, but I already know who it is. I open it to my sister’s disapproving face.

“Hey sis.” She holds out a bag for me, but the apprehensive look doesn’t leave her face. “Would you like to come in?”

“No, I would not.” I’m a little surprised at the hostility in Juliet’s tone. She was always so supportive of Morgan and I being together. I kind of thought she would be thrilled about us getting back together.

“Everything okay, Jules?” She eyes me for a moment before letting out a long sigh.

“Look Bryce, I love you. You know I do. But I love Morgan too.”

“I know you do.” I’m not sure where she’s going with this, but I stay quiet and let her get her thoughts out.

“I’ve always loved the idea of you two being together, and when it finally happened, I was thrilled. But I will not let you break her heart again. So whatever hangups you might have, you either get over them right now, or let her go for good.”

I can’t say I’m exactly surprised by her words. Juliet has always had a strong backbone and doesn’t take anyone’s shit.

“I’m not letting her go, Jules.” She raises one eyebrow and looks at me with heavy scrutiny. “I’m in this. For good this time.

Finally, she nods her head and gives me a bright smile. “Then I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, sis.” I pull her into a tight hug, but when she hears the water from my bathroom turn off, she says a quick goodbye and hurries away.

I go straight to the bathroom and roam my eyes over Morgan’s naked and dripping wet body. She turns to look at me when she senses me standing in the doorway. Her hair is soaking wet, sticking to her shoulders and cheeks and her body is flushed pink from the hot water.

“Juliet brought you some clothes.” The pink flush turns to crimson at the mention of my sister and the fact that she obviously knows what happened between us.

I step further into the bathroom, gripping her hips and pushing against the counter top. I’m only in a pair of sweats, so it’s impossible for her not to feel exactly how she’s affecting me right now. I lean down and lick up the droplets of water along the skin of her neck before biting down with more force than necessary.

“Bryce!” Morgan cries as she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me tighter against her. I grind my hips, pulling a moan from her throat. I grip tightly onto her hips, ready to lift her up onto the counter when the door buzzes again. I groan in

irritation because as much as I want to fuck Morgan again, I also want to feed her.

“Get dressed and I’ll get the food.” I love the fact that she looks as frustrated as I am, so I lean in and kiss her again. “Don’t worry, babe. We’ll be picking this back up later.”

I PULL up in front of the office, immediately noticing my Dad’s car in his usual spot. I let out a small chuckle, because I’m not at all surprised at the fact that he’s here today. He’s not a workaholic in the traditional sense of the word. But since he gave all of the employees time off until after the new year, he’s going to come in and make sure everything is good so there are no issues and he can also take the time off as well. Dad loves the holidays, which is why he shuts down the corporate offices during them. He always makes himself available if there’s an emergency, but he likes to enjoy his time with our family as much as possible.

When I get up to the top floor of the building, I make a beeline directly for Dad’s office. I’m not surprised to find him hunched over his desk going through a mountain of paperwork. He’s always been the best example a son could ask for. Hardworking and motivated. But unfailingly dedicated to his family. I knock softly on his door and he looks up at me with a bright smile.

“Hey son, what are you doing here today?” I walk further into the office, not totally sure why I feel nervous right now. Of all people, dad is one that will understand completely why I’m asking what I’m about to ask him.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Morgan

I hold back a sigh as I watch the woman in my store yet again pick up the same jewelry box that she's picked up and put back down four different times now. If it weren't for the huge pile of items that are already sitting on the counter waiting for her to pay for, then I'd probably tell her I'm closing early just to get her the hell out of here. But, doing a quick calculation, her purchase is going to be at least five-hundred dollars. I'm not stupid enough to turn that down. Besides, Bryce is still at the office. I'm not sure when he's going to be done, but he said to just come over when I close tonight.

My emotions have been all over the place today after last night. The revelation that he didn't actually cheat on me has been giving my heart whiplash all day. One minute I'm thrilled at the fact that he never actually betrayed me by sleeping with Natalia. The next, I'm pissed because I've been miserable for the past year, and he betrayed me by letting me believe that he did sleep with her. It's been an interesting day to say the least.

The woman picks up the jewelry box again, but this time she doesn't put it back down. Finally, she walks up to the counter and adds it to the rest of the items she's picked out over the past hour she's been in here. I ring her up, wrap and bag all of the items, and walk her to the door. I look around and notice way too many empty spots and shelves for my

liking, so I go to the back storage room to pull out more inventory.

I load the new items in a box and when I walk back out to the front of the store, it almost falls from my hands.

“What are you doing here?” Bryce looks at me with an amused smile before rushing over and taking the box out of my hands.

“Wow, is that any way to greet a customer?” He sets the box down and immediately begins carefully unloading the items in it.

“Customer, huh?”

“Yep. I’m looking for something for my girlfriend.”

“Hmm,” I pretend to be thinking hard, and I have to admit that I’ve really missed this sweet flirty side of Bryce. He’s never been one to take things too seriously and that may have been one of my favorite things about him. He worked hard and knew when it was time to work and when it was time to play. “Well, can you tell me a bit about her? Maybe I can give you some ideas.”

Bryce stops what he’s doing and steps closer to me. His hands grip my hips and he traps me between him and the table behind me.

“Well,” he says casually, like we’re still having a conversation about someone else. “She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.” *Okay, swoon.* “She’s sarcastic, but so funny.” He leans down and places a soft kiss on my neck. “She likes the color yellow but doesn’t wear it because she thinks it makes her look like a lemon.” I let out a little gasp because I know for sure I only made that comment once, when I was in high school. How the hell does he remember that? “She also loves roses and hates when people put baby’s-breath in bouquets.”

“She sounds like an interesting person.” My words come out low and breathy because his lips move to the junction between my neck and shoulder and he knows that spot is weak spot.

“She is. She also loves anything with peanut butter and chocolate, and she’ll eat pretty much anything if put cheese on it.”

“She has good taste.” I barely manage a response because his hand has officially slid up my dress and his tongue is sliding across my barely visible cleavage. Bryce lifts his head, looking at me with eyes that are blazing with need and desire.

“She does.” Before I can respond, he captures my mouth, his tongue demanding entry. His mouth ravishes mine and our bodies are flush against each other. His dick is already rock hard and all I can think about is how much I want it right now.

Without thinking too hard about it, I push Bryce back just far enough to give me room to drop to my knees. I don’t care that we’re in my store right now, or that anyone could walk in at any moment. We’re on the other side of a table and bookshelf, so if someone does come in, we’ll know before they’d see us.

I make quick work of undoing his pants and pulling him out. Bryce tries to protest, but I ignore him, needing to taste him. I hold his dick in my hand, and lick the bead of precum from the tip. I let out a low moan when the salty sweet taste hits my tongue.

I circle my tongue around his crown before licking a pay down his shaft.

“Fuck, Morgan. Your mouth is heaven, baby.” I take him all the way down my throat and only stop when I hit the back of my throat, causing me to gag. I pull back, but only for a second before I repeat the action. Once my throat relaxes a little more, I up my pace. Bryce tangles his fingers in my hair, and even though I’m not sure he realizes he’s doing it, he begins to buck his hips. We fall into a mutual rhythm with Bryce basically fucking my face, and me taking every last centimeter he gives me. My nails dig into his thighs and I can feel myself growing wetter with every moan and groan he releases. After a couple minutes, his thrusts become more and more frantic and he lets go of my hair.

“Fuck, baby. I’m gonna- Morgan, babe, I’m gonna cum.” Instead of pulling away, I suck him in deeper, using my hand to jerk him off, milking every last drop from him when he finally lets go and releases into my mouth. Once I’ve swallowed it all down, Bryce grabs onto my arms, hauls me to my feet and kisses me with a heady force.

His hand begins to slide back under my dress just as the bell over the door rings, making him pull away. He looks frustrated and horny and it makes me laugh.

“Still want me to come over when I close?” I ask as he tucks himself away and fixes his pants. He doesn’t answer, only giving me a look that clearly says I’m an idiot if I think he doesn’t want me to. I let out a low laugh as I lean in and give me a quick kiss.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bryce

This week has been perfect. Morgan has spent the night at my apartment every night this week. Going to bed and waking up with her in my arms has been a dream I haven't allowed myself to have for a long time now. It's amazing how easily she's managed to fit into my life. Almost as if she was never out of it. There's even been a few times that I've caught her sitting out by the pool with Fitzy and my sister drinking martini's. Every time that's happened, I've had to carry her back to my place because Morgan does not hold her liquor nearly as much as the old lady or my sister, who basically drinks vodka as water half the time.

Today, Morgan is at my parents house with Juliet. The warmth that spread in my chest when Morgan told me that they were spending the day baking has been with me all day. She's never been a huge lover of Christmas, not that I can blame her, considering her past. The holiday hasn't always been kind to her, but I'm determined to give her a new perspective on it. My parents love Christmas, and they instilled that love into Juliet and I.

I walk into the jewelry store, already knowing what I'm looking for, so I don't pay any mind to the sales people that are looking at me with dollar signs in their eyes.

Twenty minutes later, I'm walking out of the store with a small bag in hand. It's Christmas eve, so the streets and stores

are all crowded, but I don't mind at all. The hustle and bustle is a part of all the fun. The music filtering out onto the sidewalks from the different stores, the ringing bells from the charity Santa's on the street corners, the over-the-top decorations. It's all part of the experience of Christmas and I wouldn't have it any other way.

I spend the day shopping, buying gifts for my mom and sister. I begrudgingly buy gifts for my extended family as well, even though I wish more than anything that they weren't spending Christmas with us. I tell Dad all the time that he's too damn nice to his siblings and cousins. They're all assholes and don't care about anyone but themselves. Yet he still invites them for holidays and sends them Birthday cards every year. Luckily, they don't always accept his invitations. Unfortunately, this year, they did.

When I finish my shopping, I head back to my apartment, already exhausted from the day. I consider going to my parents house, but I know they won't be done baking yet. It's only two in the afternoon, and dinner isn't until six-thirty, so I know they'll be baking until at least five.

I plop down on the couch with a loud huff just as my phone chimes with a notification. A Google alert pops up with my name on it and as soon as I open it, my heart drops to my stomach. There's a photo of Morgan and I kissing on the street and the headline is so cruel, I have to swallow down the bile rising in my throat.

BRYCE RICHARDSON back on the rolls.

WHAT THE HELL is wrong with people? I read through the article, my stomach twisting more and more with each word read. There's not a single positive thing said about Morgan. Hell, the only thing even talked about is her weight. Fuck, they even say I should be careful not to be smothered by her thighs. What kind of moron would think that's a bad thing? If that's the way I went, I would die a damn happy man.

I close out the article, then send a quick text to my lawyer telling him I want to sue the website before getting up and leaving my apartment.

I race over to my parents, refusing to make the same mistakes I did last year. I don't know if Morgan has seen the article yet, but either way I'm not going to try and hide it from her. She's stronger than I gave her credit for last year, and I don't give a shit what these fuckwads say about her. If they can't see that my girl is the most beautiful woman in the world, then there's seriously something wrong with them.

I pull up to my parents house, barely putting the car in park before getting out and hurrying to the house. The sound of laughter and soft talking greets me when I open the front door, which quickly helps calm my nerves. I can hear Morgan and Juliet, clear as day, and whatever they're talking about has both of them laughing like hyenas.

"I mean, it's pretty clever." Morgan says.

"Not very original," is my sister's reply. My curiosity has me going straight to the kitchen, and when I get there, they're both looking at something on a tablet that's sitting on a stand on the counter. They're both covered in flour and Christmas songs are playing softly on the speaker. My mother is leaning over, pulling a tray of cookies out of the oven.

It takes a moment before they even notice me, and once they do, they both start cracking up again.

"Oh my gosh, Bryce." My sister says through peels of laughter. "Did you see this article?" I peek at the tablet and notice right away that they're looking at the same article I got the alert for earlier.

"This is all bullshit." Morgan looks at me like I've lost my mind, and the look my sister gives me is a mirror image of it.

"Of course it's bullshit," Juliet says, as if I'm just a total dumbass. That doesn't bother me, though. What's bothering me is the fact that Morgan's laughter has disappeared and her face has suddenly gone hard.

“What? Did you come here to break up with me again?” My heart rate picks up and my palms become clammy, because the last thing I want is for this crap to tear us apart again because I don’t know how to handle it. “Seriously, Bryce, if you don’t want to be with me, then just fucking say so. Stop using other people’s opinions about me as an excuse!” Her voice is angry, but the slight wobble in it, paired with her glassy eyes tells me that she’s hurt more than anything. My mother and Juliet are both looking at me with looks of disappointment, and I refuse to let them believe this. I’m not going through this again. I won’t let Morgan go. Not this time.

“No, babe. I am not breaking up with you, not now and not ever.” I wish my words had more of an effect on her, but they don’t. She’s still looking at me with a mix of frustration and anger.

I walk around to the other side of the kitchen and take her hands in mine. She’s resistant at first, but I keep tugging until she walks closer to me and I’m able to pull her a couple feet away from my mother and sister. I don’t care that her hands are dirty, or that she’s covered in flour. All I care about is her, and making sure we’re okay.

“I don’t care what anyone else says. I love you so damn much, I’m never letting anything come between us again.” She lets out a soft breath and I watch as her body visibly relaxes.

“You’re not embarrassed?”

“Why the hell would I be embarrassed? You’re the most beautiful woman in the world, and if those moronic reporters refuse to see that just so they can get views on a bullshit story, then that’s on them.”

She nods her head a couple times, but I’m not convinced that she fully believes me. I pull her body against mine and wrap my hand around the back of her neck. When I lean down and capture her mouth with mine, I’m relieved that she easily gives in, kissing me back with enthusiasm. I hear Jules and my mom shuffling around the kitchen, which snaps me out of my daze.

“I’m sorry.” I whisper the words against her lips and feel the way she smiles back at me.

“I forgive you,” she says before kissing me again. “This time.”

EPILOGUE

Morgan

I groan out loud at the sudden noise filtering into the bedroom. I have no idea what time it is, but Bryce and I didn't fall asleep until almost three in the morning after our fifth -or maybe it was sixth?- round of sex. Once we got back from his parents, I don't think he managed to keep his hands off of me for more than thirty seconds at a time. Not that I'm complaining.

I stretch out on the bed, enjoying the soreness of my body. A reminder of last night and the promises Bryce and I made to each other. When he got to his parents house yesterday, and I saw the way his face paled when he realized Jules and I were reading that ridiculous article, I thought for sure we were going to end up having a repeat of last year. But to my surprise, that's not what happened at all. He kept saying that he's not letting me go, that he won't let anything or anyone ruin us again. What's even more surprising to me, is the fact that I believe him.

I sit up in bed and take a moment to gather my bearings, listening carefully to the noise that's coming from the living room and hallway. *Christmas music.*

I shouldn't be all that surprised since I know how much Bryce loves Christmas. Hell, I know how much the entire Richardson family loves Christmas. They also all know how much I *don't* like Christmas. Though Bryce kept insisting last

night that he was going to change my mind. When I told him it probably wouldn't be possible to do that, he definitely took it as a challenge. I have no doubt that whatever is happening right now is a part of his plan.

I reluctantly climb out of bed, not bothering to put any other clothes on. I'm only wearing one of Bryce's t-shirts over a pair of simple cotton panties, but it's not like we have plans to go anywhere. At least not until we go have lunch with his family.

I make my way to the kitchen, where the music is actually coming from, and find Bryce cooking something at the stove. His back is facing me, so I take a moment to just watch him. I admire the way his back muscles ripple with every move he makes, and the way his ass flexes when he reaches over for something. *Damn, he is sexy.*

"Good morning," I finally say after I allow myself a couple more minutes to stare.

He turns around, giving me a bright smile. "Merry Christmas!"

He immediately puts down the spatula he was holding and walks over to me, gathering me in his arms and kissing me with the same passion he's had all night. "I hope you're hungry."

A FEW HOURS LATER, we're getting ready to go over to his parent's house for lunch and I'm in the bathroom finishing up my hair and make-up.

"Hey babe?" I hear Bryce call from the living. "Will you come out here when you have a second?"

"Be there in a sec!" Something about the simple domesticity of this whole situation has me smiling. It's not like I've moved in with him or anything yet, but the easy routine we've managed to fall into and the comfortable way we are with each other, tells me that it's only a matter of time before we take that step.

Once I'm finished getting ready, I walk out to the living and I stop dead in my tracks at what I find. All the lights are turned off and the blinds are closed, letting only a small amount of sunlight into the apartment. The lights on the Christmas tree are bright and colorful, turning it into a beacon in the dark. Bryce is standing next to it with the sweetest smile on his face. He's dressed in a pair of distressed jeans and dark green button up shirt that fits over his arms and shoulders deliciously.

"What's going on?" I can hear the way my voice has dropped a couple of octaves and my heart begins to beat wildly in my chest.

Bryce holds out his hand for me, and hesitantly, I step forward and take it.

"Morgan, I love you. I've loved you for so long now, I'm not even sure if I remember a time that I didn't." He stops for a moment, his throat bobbing as he swallows. "Last Christmas, I broke your heart. For the past year, I've been living with that pain and regret everyday. But this year, I vowed to make you love Christmas again." He keeps hold of my hand as he slowly drops down to one knee. He uses his free hand to grab something from underneath the tree as he continues to talk. "I promise, from this moment on, I will do nothing but love and cherish you, and show you how absolutely amazing I think you are." He pulls his hand away, and even through my glassy eyes, I can make out the shape of a ring box. When he flips the top up, I let out a loud gasp. The ring is beautiful. A vintage inspired rose gold ring with a large black diamond centered inside a halo of white diamonds. It's without a doubt exactly what I would have picked out for myself and I'm not at all surprised that Bryce knew that.

"Morgan, will you please spend every Christmas with me for the rest of our lives?" It takes him a few tries to get the full question out since emotion begins to clog his throat and his voice breaks a couple of times. Tears are officially streaming down my face, and at first all I can do is nod.

"Yes!" He gives me a blinding smile as he slides the ring on my finger before standing and giving me the best kiss of

my life.

If you had told me just a few months ago if I would be standing next to a bright Christmas tree kissing my fiancé, I would have thought you were crazy. I would have told you that was impossible and there was nothing in the world that could make me love Christmas.

Of course I should have known that if anyone could make me change my mind, it would be this man right here, holding me in his arms and kissing me until I have no breath left in me.

The best Christmas gift I could have ever asked for.

Bryce Richardson.

My fiancé.

CURVES FOR CHRISTMAS SERIES

Return to Fitzpatrick Place this Christmas where things are heating up with some brand new tenants. From Sexy Santas to Mistletoe Kisses, the Curves for Christmas Series is bringing you over 20 new stories to warm you up this holiday season!

[Single Dad Santa](#) by Heather Lauren

[One Night with Santa](#) by Eve London

[The Christmas Seduction](#) by Rebecca Austin

[The Daddy Claus](#) by Josie O'Sullivan

[Snow One Like You](#) by Haven Rose

[Caught Red Handed](#) by Melverna McFarlane

[His Christmas Obsession](#) by Sadie King

[Sugar Plum Daddy](#) by Rebecca Gallo

[Sugar Cookie Kisses](#) by Aubree Valentine

[Secret Santa](#) by Willow Sanders

[Snow Thanks](#) by Layne Daniels

[Frost My Cookie](#) by J. Preston

[My Holiday Surprise](#) by Jessa Joy

[Tangled in Tinsel](#) by Kamaria Sweet

[Under the Mistletoe](#) by Sammi Starlight

[Christmas Star](#) by Lana Love

[Blissful Vixen](#) by Jade Royal

Unwrapped for You by Annie Charme

Second Chance Scrooge by J.J. Grice

His Fake Holidate by Anne Lange

Owned for Xmas by Imani Jay

ALSO BY J.J. GRICE

The Maine Stay

<https://mybook.to/TheMaineStay>

Dark Matter Security

<https://mybook.to/DarkMatterSecurity>

Burn it Down

<https://mybook.to/jjgriceBiD>