



SNOW
Thanks

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LAYNE DANIELS

SNOW THANKS

A CURVES FOR CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

LAYNE DANIELS



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Snow Thanks

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Edited by Brynn Paulin

Cover by Matilda Martel

Special thanks to Natalie Arthur, Pixie Chica, and West Greene who helped me write my first ever Single Mom trope and gave me confidence to stretch my wings.



Layne is a USA Today Bestselling Author, a long time reader of steamy romance, and began writing her own stories in December of 2020. Her favorite books to read are about Daddy Doms, strong alpha men who fall in love with fierce women, and sex positive living. When she's not writing, she's wrangling her family of jocks into some semblance of chill, running a business, getting ALL the tattoos, and living her very own instalove fairytale with Mr. Mine.

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DEAR READER,

“I don’t know where I’m going from here, but I promise it won’t be boring.” - David Bowie

When I first started writing, I was so convinced of things I would/wouldn’t ever write. Tropes I thought weren’t for me, character types, on and on. Every day it seems like new ideas and characters take me farther away from where I expected I’d be staying. Characters like Lavender show up and divide they’re going to be in a story whether I planned for it or not.

I used to scoff at writers who said things like “this character isn’t listening to me!” Then I met some of mine and it all made sense! Jonah was so noble and patient here, he really made me wait for things I wanted to happen much sooner. It’s all good though, when they say writers know how to get payback it’s true! Poor Jonah, I really embarrassed the poor guy.

Maybe he’ll spread the word to future characters that they oughta listen to their author. Ya think? We’ll see.

Hope your holiday season is filled with love and laughter!

Until next time,

XoXo,

Layne

CHAPTER 1



JONAH TAYLOR

In my opinion, Thursday nights are the third worst evenings of the seven. It's the last night Sirena dances in one of the cages at my nightclub, Loft. The second worst is Friday because I don't get to see her. The worst of all are Saturday nights when I haven't seen her for so long.

I hate that when the bar closes on Thursday night, she leaves to do whatever it is keeping her from here for three straight days. I hate that I have no idea what that whatever is. I hate that she's not where I can see her and know she's safe and cherished.

I know it's Sirena's right to have a life away from her job. I know being a burlesque dancer, perched in a chest-high cage and being stared at every night, isn't the sum total of who she is. I also know she has no idea how much of my heart she takes with her every time one of the bartenders or security guys safely escorts her to her car.

I don't have a clue how to turn not knowing these answers into information I have. When I opened Loft with my three best friends, we had a handful of goals. We dreamed of creating a safe place for people to enjoy well-made cocktails, great dance music, and the aesthetic experience of sensuous burlesque moves from the women dancing inside cages on platforms lofted in the air.

It just sort of worked out that Callum and the twins, Liam and Casyn, fell in love with dancers I hired as the employment and front-of-house manager. Ironically, Callum hired Sirena while I was out sick a few months ago. I can't say I wouldn't have hired her if she'd interviewed with me, but it definitely wouldn't have been for the cage. The bar, maybe, where I'd be guaranteed less people would get to see her sexy ass dancing in a bustier and fishnets.

Being extraordinarily curvy isn't a requirement for dancing in one of our lofts, but it's gravitated toward that ever since our first plus-sized goddess ascended the ladder into one for our opening night. The twins' wife, Marlyce, is the plushest dancer we've got, followed by Callum's wife, Lumi. Sirena's curvier than our fourth dancer, Jade, but all I can think when I see Sirena is how much curvier she'd be if I filled her with my baby. I'd keep her lush with excess while I spoiled and pampered her every single day with treats and adoration.

Lofty goal, pun intended, given that every single time I try to get to know her, she blows me off entirely. Oh, she's not rude about it, not my sexy goddess. And when she thinks I'm not looking at her, I catch the longing glances she sends my way. But every single time I've try to convince her to hang around after her shift or to grab breakfast at the diner down the block, she's refused completely.

I don't let her rejections stop me from asking her out every Thursday night. Which is yet another reason to list Thursdays as the third worst night of the week. This week, like every other Thursday, I'm left standing at the club's door, watching her taillights fade as she drives away from me.

"I know it's hard to let her say no every week." Lumi's voice is soft and sweet as she loops her arm through mine. Callum's soft growl behind us brings a dark chuckle out of me. Though he's learning to use his busted up vocal chords more and more now that he's found love, he still just mostly grunts and growls.

As possessive as he is over his wife, her showing me affection probably makes him crazy. I know him well enough to understand his growl is less about her hand on my arm and more a warning to me not to snap at her. Everyone around here seems to know Thursdays are the nights I'm most likely to be a snarly asshole these days.

"No idea what you're talking about, kiddo." I temper my voice so Callum settles down. Not that he backs off at all.

"Sure, boss-man. You can lie to yourself, but a woman in love can spot a pining man a mile away."

“I’m not pining. I’m watching over an employee to ensure she gets to her vehicle safely after her shift.” And then, obsessing over every minute she’s gone until I see her again. I don’t add that part aloud. I’m not an idiot.

“You could just follow her like Callum did me before we got together.” The sly wink she throws over her shoulder at him is adorable. Last year, when she realized Cal was practically stalking her because he was head over heels gone for her, she turned the tables. She managed to ‘stalk’ him right back until he had no choice but to use his voice and make her his.

A childhood accident had rendered him nearly mute, so speaking up to win her over was a big deal for him. Still, the circumstances were totally different. Callum might be part owner of the club with me, Liam, and Casyn, but I’m the president. The big boss.

Back when Callum first started his silent shadow routine, *and* when the twins started panting after Marlyce, it was my job to pull the ladies into my office to touch base with them. I made sure they felt safe, respected, and didn’t feel pressured to reciprocate the guys’ attention. For weeks, it fell to me to worry whether my idiot best friends were creating a toxic work environment for employees.

Lucky for us, the women were both as in love with my buddies as the guys were with them. Sexual harassment suits are not an attractive look for a nightclub working to cultivate a reputation as a safe place for women to come and have a great time. So yeah, a totally different situation.

“Not happening. Just because the stalker thing worked out for you and Marlyce doesn’t mean it wouldn’t scare Sirena. Even if she never looks twice at me, I won’t do anything to make her want to leave Loft.” Fuck, even the idea of her not working here anymore is enough to give me angina. I’m too damn young for my heart to hurt like that.

“Oh, she looks twice. Trust me.” With that potentially useless bit of hope-inducing promise, Lumi allows Callum to pry her away from me and haul her toward the back where the

management offices are. I'm more glad than ever that we sprung for soundproofing back there. I've got payroll to process before I can get out of here for the night, and I really have no desire to hear what I'm sure they're about to get up to.

Especially, since more than ever, it seems as if I'll never get to that point with Sirena.

CHAPTER 2



SIRENA REED

“M ommy, we’re outta pumpkin spice frozen waffles, and I’m hungry.” My sweet, but feisty, baby girl’s voice could pull me back from the depths of hell itself, and normally, I’d be happy for it. But things were just getting good in my dream about my boss doing some very, very unbosslike things when she burst into my bedroom with her breakfast demand.

Guess I should be thankful. Dreaming about Jonah and wishing things could be different is a depth of hell itself. I see the way he watches me with care and interest that goes deeper than that of an employer for his worker. It hurts that I have to turn him down every time he asks me out. Even when he’s asking in friendship, without any pressure. I can’t afford the risk he’d bring to my life. To my daughter’s life.

Lavender has to come first. She’s only six, and she deserves to have the most stability and security I can give her. I only turned twenty-one a few months ago, pretty much the week before I got hired at Loft. Starting work there has been the turning point for us, which is why I’m so determined not to let anything put my job at risk.

What’s riskier than falling for my boss? Aside from letting my first, and to date only, boyfriend convince me to go all the way with him, nothing. I learned then and there that risk taking isn’t for me. Yeah, I wouldn’t trade my daughter for anything, but taking that risk at fourteen had cost me my parents, my home, and so many normal teenage experiences I missed out on to raise her.

I’d been lucky enough to land in a foster home that took me in while I was pregnant and helped me learn how to be a mom when she was born. To this day, I know Mama Krissy and her husband, Mr. Dwight, love and care about me. They’re proud of me for being a good mom to Lavender, and they help out as much as they can. They’ve got new foster kids living

there now, so I have to keep my feet underneath me and a roof over our heads.

“Just have a blueberry waffle, Snookie. I’ll buy more pumpkin ones at the store this afternoon.” I’m pretty sure I’m using actual words, but as tired as I am, all I hear is a long, rumbly mumble. Lav understands me perfectly, though.

“Mo-ooo-om! I can’t put PSL syrup on blueberry waffles. That’s gross.” Did I say she was six? Six going on sixteen, maybe. She’s already perfected the hand-on-hip, sassy attitude I saw girls doing when I was in high school.

I never got the chance to be a bratty troublemaker. I was too busy juggling school and grades with being there for my baby and working to save up for a place of our own. All she really needs to accomplish peak teen girl dramatics is the emphatic hair toss to match the little foot stomp. With her cute little pixie-cut hairstyle, I might have a few years before she throws that move into the mix.

“So use regular syrup today, and you’ll have the perfect amount of spice syrup for when we get more waffles. See? It’s logic.”

“Logic isn’t as good as waffles, Mommy.” Her little hand waves over her shoulder as she wanders down the short hall to our kitchen. When she’s done with a conversation, she’s done with it. Not in a rude way, but with a simple confidence I can only dream of embracing for myself.

I’m rarely confident. Almost every minute is spent second guessing the decisions made in the moment before. About the only time I’m really free to be myself is when I’m perched safely in my cage above the crowd of people out to have a good time at Loft.

My penchant for overthinking and second guessing myself almost cost me the job altogether. Which is especially wild because it’s turned out to be the absolute perfect place for me to be. At my last job, dancers were expected to be raunchy and extremely sexual in our dance moves. Plus it was a requirement that we dance in thongs and pasties.

It was such a relief to start at Loft and learn the dancers get to choose from a wide selection of actual outfits. That none of the costumes make me feel like my curtains are one high kick away from flapping in the wind? Priceless. And when I say there's security to protect everyone at Loft, I mean it. Between Casyn and Liam, the twins who run the security team, and Callum and Jonah, it feels like the safest place I've ever been.

By the time I make it to the kitchen with my robe belted around my waist and slipper socks pulled high to keep my feet warm, Lav's already got the waffles out of the freezer ready for me to hurry and make her breakfast. She saw on a cartoon once that breakfast is the most important meal of the day and she has held that kernel of wisdom like it's solid gold. Probably because most breakfast foods don't have any vegetables in them.

"It's super cold today, Mommy. Maybe, we'll finally get snow!"

"Ah, Snookie, it doesn't really snow here in Bourbon. Texas is too close to the equator for much snow."

"What's a 'quater?" When Lavender first started talking, dropped vowels and consonants had me panicking. I thought for sure something was wrong because she didn't always pronounce words correctly, even right after hearing them spoken. As an only child, I was never around younger kids much. And by the time I was old enough to start babysitting, I was growing my own baby.

I squash my chuckle at her mispronunciation of the word. Lav doesn't mind if I help her sound out words, but she gets so frustrated if she thinks I'm laughing at her.

"It's equator. Eee cuh way tor."

"Equator."

"Perfect, Snookie. Just like you. The equator is a line that circles around the earth like an invisible belt. It separates the northern part of the planet from the southern part of the planet." Figuring out how to explain things to a little kid is a

talent I've developed since my daughter asked her first questions. She's so inquisitive it's hard to keep up with her.

“Why's the planet need a belt? Why can't it be one big ball without a line on it?”

I think I failed in explaining the concept of hemispheres and planetary composition. On the plus side, she's distracted enough to drop the subject of snow. Which is a good thing, because she's been on a kick about having a white Christmas since the first holiday specials of the season started playing on television in early November.

“I don't know, but I bet I know where we could find out ___”

“The li-bary!” Magic word invoked, my little girl focuses her attention on shoveling her breakfast into her tummy as fast as she can so we can get dressed and head to the library. It's one of her favorite places, and I love it, too. There aren't many spots to keep a kid with her smarts and endless quests for information satisfied. At least, not free ones. So I'm happy as can be to spend our Saturday mornings at the library where it's warm and easy on my wallet.

CHAPTER 3



JONAH

Friday sucked. Saturday sucked. Sure the club's been packed and there's a waitlist to get in every weekend night for months. Whatever. I don't care. Both nights still sucked last week just as they have every weekend since I laid eyes on Sirena. Now, it's four o'clock on Sunday evening, and while the other girls are already here getting on their outfits and choosing which platform they'll each start in, Sirena's nowhere I can see.

"Hey, Jade. Sirena in the locker room?" Here the longest of our four dancers, Jade's the most likely to know what's going on with anyone in the building at any given moment. She gives me a knowing smile as she shakes her head, and though her lips might be tipping up, her eyes are tight with worry.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" I might be obsessed with Sirena—okay, no *might* about it. I am obsessed with Sirena. But that doesn't mean I'm oblivious to everyone else. Jade's a sweet young woman, and if something's bothering her, I'll fix it.

"I'm fine. Lumi just told me Callum pulled a message from Sirena from the office voicemail, though. She said she won't be in toni—"

I'm already rushing to the hallway leading to our offices to listen to the message myself. If something's happened to her, I'll—

"Jonah, man, slow down. Did Cal find you?" Liam pops out of the security office just as I'm passing it.

"Not now. I need to listen to the messages." Whatever it is, whatever she needs, I'll make sure she has it. I push past Liam and hurry to my desk to grab the headset and listen to the message. It's unremarkable in content; shattering in impact.

All Sirena said in her message is she has to call out for illness tonight and she's really sorry. Her voice sounds strained and not at all like the gentle and sweet woman I've heard encouraging guests to follow her dance steps. She's a crowd favorite because she makes the women who come here feel confident to copy the burlesque moves and entice their partners.

Something's wrong. She doesn't say it in her message, but I hear it. I feel it. Which means nothing else matters. My car keys are on the hook just inside my door, and I've got them and my jacket in hand before the next message on the voicemail system can even begin.

I already know where she lives, thanks to Callum bragging about finding a new tenant to fill Lumi's condo so she could move in with him several months back. Even if Cal hadn't boasted about it, I've seen her take a tipsy Fitzzy home in her car at the end of the night enough times to be aware she's living at Fitzpatrick place. Not for nothing, but pouring Fitzzy into a car at the end of the night is nothing new around here. For an octogenarian, the woman parties like a rockstar and has the fan base to go with it. She's owned Fitzpatrick place, a luxury condo property, for years. A staple of the Bourbon community, she's a treasure we all adore and look out for, even though she'll claim she's the one looking out for all of us.

No one stops me as I storm through the front of the club. It's early enough the evening is just getting started. The girls won't ascend into their cages until after happy hour is nearly finished. For now, they're setting up their props, making sure there's a water bottle near the entrance to each platform and towels for blotting sweat folded beside them.

I scan the early crowd for Fitzzy, knowing the feisty matriarch of Bourbon loves hanging around Loft. She says it reminds her of how clubs were when she was young. Based on the shenanigans I've seen her get up to with my own eyes, it's hard to imagine what kind of shit she must have pulled as a young woman. It figures the one night I'm most hoping to catch her so I can pump her for information, she's nowhere to be seen.

The drive to Fitzpatrick Place passes in a blur. If I hadn't been in such a desperate rush to get to Sirena, I could have walked there. I charge through the public areas, ignoring a surprising number of people milling about and enjoying their neighbors. I haven't lived in an apartment since college, but even then, there wasn't this feeling of community and neighborliness.

I hurry down a hallway to get to the door I know is Sirena's and knock before I even catch my breath. I have no idea what I'll say when she gets to the door, assuming she's home. I just know I need to lay eyes on her as soon as possible. I need to know she's okay.

Time passes slower than logically possible. Sirena never misses a shift. She's prompt and a great team member for everyone around her. Whatever's going on to cause her to call out with no notice has to be a massive crisis. Over the racing thump-thump of my heart, I hear the sound of a safety chain rattling as it's unfastened. Then the snick of a deadbolt being turned. Finally, fucking finally, the door opens wide enough for me to get a look at my love.

"Jonah? What are you doing here?" Her rich dark brown eyes are wide in shock, but dark circles under each tell the story of a rough night. Her face looks drawn and stressed, her lips pressed thin together in an anxious frown. Her gorgeous face is free of the makeup she typically wears for her shifts. She's still heart-stoppingly beautiful, but without the artfully applied winged eyeliner and rich red lips she looks terribly young.

I know she's younger than me by a dozen or so years, but right now, she looks so youthful I feel like a bastard for all the fantasies I've had about her. I remind myself, no matter how young she looks, I've seen the IRS paperwork that guarantees she's over twenty-one. Barely.

"You're not at work. I was worried." So many words crowd in my throat right now, but the picture behind Sirena suddenly snaps into focus and steals every single one of them, along with my air.

“Mommy, who’s that big man?” Every word is punctuated by either a wet sniffle or a deep wracking cough. The little person in a SpongeBob nightgown is a pint-size clone of the woman in front of me.

The woman none of us knew had a daughter.

CHAPTER 4



SIRENA

“That’s a kid.” Jonah looks so shocked I’d find it funny if it wasn’t also freaking terrifying. I don’t keep Lavender a secret. Not really. But I’ve learned to keep being a mom completely separate from being a dancer. Sure, things at Loft are all aboveboard and classy, but old habits die hard.

The strip clubs I worked at before I turned twenty-one and became old enough to work in actual bars were dangerous places to let on that a girl has obligations. Unscrupulous bosses will use any leverage they can to squeeze more hours or deny them. Whatever they want to do. Knowing I have a child to provide for put me at their mercy.

No, I don’t believe Jonah is that type of boss. My coworkers absolutely seem like great people. My duty is to Lavender, though. Until I knew it’s absolutely safe, I’ve kept the fact I spend my days mommying and my nights dancing a secret.

“Go lay down in Mommy’s bed, Lav. I’ll be right there.” I force myself to project calm with my voice. Calmness I definitely do not feel at this moment.

“You have a kid, and she’s sick.” He still sounds shocked, but now, concern threads into the words. His left hand cards through his thick hair, tugging at the strands in need of a trim. He doesn’t look horrified, though, which is good.

“Now you see why I’ve turned down your invitations? Everyone’s invitations? I work, and I come home to relieve the babysitter. My days are for my daughter. It’s a boundary I can’t cross, Jonah.”

It’s not an apology, because I’m not sorry. Lavender is all I really have in this world, and she needs me. Krissy and Dwight might try to step in if things get really dire, but I can’t ever expect it.

“That’s not important right now, Bunny. We’ll sort out everything and talk later. Right now, tell me how I can help.” He doesn’t cross the threshold, simply waits for directions. My hands flap around uselessly. I have no idea what would be helpful or even how to ask for help.

“I...I don’t know?” The truth is, I’m still trying to figure out exactly what’s going on with Lavender. She’s typically so healthy she could walk through a flu outbreak and not get a sniffle. She woke up this morning with a raspy voice and an upset tummy. The day’s gone downhill from there.

“She got a fever?”

“Ummm, yes.” That much I know. The forehead thermometer read one hundred and two this afternoon. I’ve given her children’s Tylenol and a lukewarm bath. Unfortunately, Lav being such a healthy kid means I don’t have a whole lot of experience with illness. Her fever came down some, but it’s still right at a hundred.

“Do you have enough sick day snacks?” he asks as if I have a freaking clue what ‘sick day snacks’ are.

Growing up, illnesses needed to be ignored because my parents weren’t going to miss work to take care of me. Krissy and Dwight would have taken care of me, for sure, but they were already giving me a place to live, so I sure wasn’t going to be a whiner when I wasn’t feeling good. Especially when it was my own damn fault I had morning sickness or a strained back from carrying Lavender’s gigantic unborn baby self.

“I don’t know what those are.” Admitting I don’t know something my daughter might need is hard. I search Jonah’s eyes for criticism and find none.

“Oh, Bunny, let me help with that part then. Any allergies or foods she hates?” One of his hands braces on the doorframe as if he’s holding himself back from storming inside, but I don’t feel anxious about it. It’s wild, but it sort of feels like a weight off my shoulders that Jonah knows about my baby girl.

Even if it means he’s done flirting with me and asking me out. Keeping secrets from him has been harder than it’s been

to hold that boundary with anyone else. Maybe...maybe, Jonah can be a friend to us.

“No allergies. She doesn’t like anything apple, but other than that, she’s an easy kid to please.” She has to be. When money is as tight as it is for us, accepting what we can afford means personal preferences take a backseat.

“Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do. I’m going to make a grocery store run to grab supplies for a sick day. You get in bed with your baby girl and snuggle her until I get back. May I take your key so I can let myself in with the snacks? That way, you can stay in bed and focus on her.” He holds out a hand for my keyring, and it’s somehow automatic to slip my house key onto his palm.

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“Oldest of five, Bunny. Fevers and snotty noses are standard with that many kids running around. Shit, you’re gonna fall over in shock when you see my mama’s first aid kit. That woman could almost report to the front line in a warzone with all her experience patching up us kids and tending to our owies.” His lips tip up in a half-smile that gives my heart a little hitch.

Even with all the stress and worry, he’s got the ability to get my insides feeling melty. I tilt my head into the hallway to watch him walk toward the stairs, and he catches me looking. This time, his lips rise in a wide grin, and he gives me a wink.

“Back in a bit, Bunny. No racing away from me this time.” It’s only now I realize he’s been calling me Bunny since I opened the door. I guess it makes sense. When he flirts with me, I have a tendency to freeze up until that fight or flight instinct takes over and I zoom to safety.

I’ve spent all these months thinking it was about safety, to protect Lavender and my ability to take care of her. But what if it’s really just been about protecting myself from being hurt? It’s not really fair to Lavender to keep our lives as solitary as they are. Not if there’s a chance there are actually good people out there who will care for her. Maybe for both of us.

CHAPTER 5



JONAH

S hopping the aisles of the grocery store to grab supplies for a sick little kid isn't what I thought I'd be doing tonight, but it feels perfectly natural. I shoot my mom a text message to make sure I'm thinking of everything then add the extras she suggests. Yeah, I'm a grown man who texts his mama for her advice. My parents are awesome. Something tells me Sirena doesn't have that, and the thought sends little electric bolts of hurt through my chest.

I'm trying to hurry, but the toy department at the back of the store is decorated for the upcoming holiday with red and green foil ornaments and lights that are impossible to ignore. I didn't miss the cartoon sea creatures on Sirena's daughter's nightgown, and I figure one of the best parts of being sick is the treats meant to occupy and distract.

I grab her some coloring books and crayons, then add some plastic tubs of neon colored slime and these little pucks that apparently expand into cartoon character washcloths when they're soaked in water. Cool baths to bring down her fever would be much more pleasant with those. I grab a couple, then throw some bath crayons into the cart, as well. Probably a good thing I don't know the girl yet, or else, I'm pretty sure I'd wind up with a third of the toy department in my trunk.

As it is, I'm uncertain how Sirena will react when she sees everything I've bought. She's so proud and reserved. I want her to understand I'm not trying to buy her trust. I just need to help. Whether she realizes it or not, I care deeply for her. One look at that little girl, a child I haven't even properly met and didn't know existed until an hour ago, and I already feel myself caring for her. She's a part of Sirena, and Sirena's mine. Which makes the child mine, too.



The condo's quiet when I get back, so I stop in the kitchen and familiarize myself with the cupboards and where things go as I put everything away. There are popsicles, electrolyte and regular, juice, Jello, fruit cups, and sore throat lollipops. I also picked up some heat and eat meals for Sirena, so she won't have to worry about cooking while her little girl needs her. Pretty sure my mom's at the family home cooking up a storm to drop off, too.

My parents know all about how hard I've fallen for the new girl at Loft. Even if I hadn't already talked their ears off about her, Cal and Lumi would have spilled the beans any of the many times they've been over. Growing up, my house was Grand Central Station for all the neighborhood kids. Even after Callum's accident, when he finally came back to town after months of surgeries and rehab, our house is where he'd come hang out. As much noise as all the rest of us made, it kept the pressure off him having to talk. Now, after so many years of near silent grunts and text messaging, it's still weird to hear him speaking up about things.

"Jonah?" My girl's husky voice has my dick reacting despite the absolute shit timing.

"Just putting groceries away, Bunny. Do you need me to bring anything back to you two?" I'm seriously hoping she says yes. I want the excuse to see more of her condo. It feels as if I'm seeing sides to Sirena she's never allowed me to see before, simply by taking in her home.

"No thanks, we're fine for the moment." Even her whisper-shout is adorable. I've got it so bad for this girl.

Despite the luxury of the building and property, Sirena's apartment is a study in making do. The furniture is obviously old and dated, though it's been cleaned and repaired. Everything I see serves a purpose, the only non-essentials visible are a few toys collected in plastic bins near an ancient television and the colorful art supplies stacked neatly on the kitchen table.

At least, I know the coloring books and artistic bath toys I picked up should go over well. The lack of creature comforts

in the spartan areas makes my chest ache. Even if Sirena never agrees to date me, there's no way I'll let her continue living such an austere life. Every primal instinct I have urges me to scoop up the two of them and spirit them to my house, so I can pamper and spoil them as they deserve.

One step at a time. Sirena's skittish and self-contained. If I bum rush her, she'll retreat, and I may lose my chance to win her over completely. The raspy sound of a tiny person coughing breaks through my worrying, and I grab an armful of the over-the-counter meds, juice boxes, and a popsicle from the freezer I just stocked.

“Okay, so I grabbed—” The words die in my throat as I take in the sight before me. The woman of my dreams, the sexiest person I've ever seen in real life, is laid out on a bed just steps away from me. Instead of immediately stiffening into solid wood, my whole body floods with the urge to protect and nurture. Make no mistake, my dick catalogs every dip and swell of her outstanding, curvy body. But my focus, my need, centers on eliminating the dark, puffy bags under her eyes and the weary set of her overstressed shoulders.

“Mommy, your boss bringed me a popsicle!” The rattling chest cold makes the little girl's words squawky.

“Shh, Lav, rest your voice.”

I move toward the duo, my arm outstretched with the popsicle.

“I know I should ask if it's okay first, but her throat sounds so painful, and I promise these are the ones my mom swears soothe the best.”

“You're kinda big to have a mommy.” Her artless statement startles a laugh from me, and both of them look at me as if I'm from another planet. It's not surprising my girl's daughter looks at me as if I'm a puzzle she wants to solve. I'm a big guy, and I'm guessing she doesn't have much experience interacting with men. Especially ones as large and loud as I know I am.

“Everybody has a mother and a father, Lavender. Even when they’re adults like Mr. Taylor.” Sirena’s blush has gone nuclear from her hairline clear to where her shirt covers the luscious swell of tits I’ve had front row seats to viewing night after night at Loft.

“You don’t got any, though, cuz I never met them.”

Sirena’s eyes meet mine, shame and panic blurring in the tears I see spiking her lashes. So much becomes clear, even as more questions than I can count pile up like a Texas interstate under a sprinkle of snow.

“I betcha this popsicle’s gonna get your sore throat to take a hike. What do you say, Shortstack?” If ever a topic needed changing, it’s now. Sirena looks as if she’s ready to sink through the floor. I know the subject of family and parents isn’t one she has the slightest desire to get into right now., and protecting my girls means from everything, even uncomfortable moments.

CHAPTER 6



SIRENA

I thought I knew Jonah Taylor. Sure, not everything. But around Loft, I've determined he's the boss least likely to be stressed out or grumpy. Callum, for all Lumi's brought him into the light, is still quiet and watchful. Liam and Casyn are goofballs when the doors to the club are closed, but the moment guests show up, it's as if they morph into hyper-protective beast mode. Not just over the woman they share, my coworker Marlyce, but all of us dancers.

Jonah's always just...Jonah. Kind of like the golden retriever in kids movies, who's always there taking care of everyone and putting out positive energy. I know he watches me more than any of the other girls, but I've always chalked it up to the chemistry I can't allow to grow. In another lifetime, sure, I would love to take him up on the offers for dinner or a date.

I couldn't envision him like this, though. Maybe, if I had, I wouldn't have turned him down so many times. From the moment he looked over my shoulder and caught sight of my daughter, I've seen a side of him I never expected. The respectful, casual flirting is gone. In its place is a take-charge dominant energy that needs no words. He knows what we need, and he's the one who will provide it.

"What time does she usually go to bed?" He's crouched down beside the bed, rather than sitting on the edge of it. I wonder if he's intentionally giving us space, so we feel safer, or if it's just his natural instinct.

"The sitter has her in bed by eight on school nights. We stay up a little later when I get to be home with her." I'm so lucky Fitzzy hooked me up with a neighbor who's a student and willing to come hang out here in the evenings while I work. Since she's able to spend most of the time studying while Lavender's asleep, she barely charges me anything.

“It’s close to six now. How about I go make some dinner for us all while you give her another cool bath? Then you can both go to bed after we eat and she takes some nighttime cold and cough medicine?”

There hasn’t been anyone to take care of us since I turned eighteen and moved us out of the foster home. The temptation to lean on Jonah and let him handle all of this is huge. I feel as if I’m taking advantage of his goodness, but I’m so freaking exhausted from the stress of carrying it all I’m unsure I have it in me to resist.

“Okay. I know I should tell you I don’t need any help—”

“But you aren’t gonna. You’re going to let me do this for you, with no strings attached. Because if nothing else, Sirena, I’m your friend. Allow me to be that.” His eyes implore me, making it clear that despite his forceful words, he’ll back off if I insist. I’m not going to insist. I nod my agreement.

“Okay, you ladies, stay here. I’ll be right back.” He winks at my daughter, making her giggle and blush. Aside from the random men we encounter at the store or the library, Lavender doesn’t have much occasion to be around adult men.

She sees my former foster dad, Dwight, every so often, but he hardly counts. He’s nearly as short as I am and weighs half as much. It’s a mystery how he manages to wrangle unruly foster teens into behaving, but somehow, he does. Still, Dwight’s energy is gentle and deferential. Nothing like the brute size and good-natured dominance pouring off Jonah tonight.

Before I wrap my brain around Jonah, here in my home, helping with my sick kid, he’s back and handing me several different children’s medications while juggling a reusable shopping bag filled with who even knows what.

“Not sure which medicine preferences you have, so I grabbed a couple options Ma suggested.”

“You called your mother about your employee’s sick child?” Even before the choices that led to me being kicked out of the house as a soon-to-be teen mom, my own parents

were hardly the type to caretake me when I was ill. I can't even imagine the look on my mother's face had I asked her for help as a teenager, much less as a grown adult. I'm pretty sure Jonah's the same age as Callum and the twins, which means he's in his thirties.

"No. I called my mother about *your* little girl. Don't get it twisted, Bunny. I'm always going to want to help out my employees as best I can. But I only call my mama for help when it's really important." He keeps stealing pieces of the wall around my heart.

He rises to his feet, all eleventy feet tall of him, and ambles from my bedroom as if he's been here a hundred times. I look at Lavender, who's watching the door as if she's seen a superhero come to life.

"Mommy, that boss is *bossy!*" Her heartfelt emphasis makes me laugh like I haven't in who knows how long. I realize I never properly introduced Jonah to her, but it didn't seem to make a lick of difference to him. I give her a dose of cough medicine and hustle her into the bathroom. With any luck, dinner will be a quick affair and she can get some sleep with the help of the meds.

"Is this for me?" Her question is hushed, as though she's afraid too much noise will notify the toy patrol to come remove the wonderland our bathroom has been turned into.

Where usually there's a bottle of kid's shampoo next to mine, tonight there's a row of brightly colored bath toys lined up like vibrant play soldiers along the side of the tub. There's floating animal squirters, bathtub crayons, and some of those washcloths that swell up into sponges and shapes when they get wet. A new bath towel hangs from the bar to the side of the tub. Cartoon princesses smile from the fluffy terry cloth.

I know this is Jonah's handiwork. I just have no clue what it means.

CHAPTER 7



JONAH

Dinner is easy enough to put together. A couple cans of princess-shaped noodle soup, grilled cheese with ham, and premade Jello squares from the deli section at the grocery store doesn't take much effort. Lavender's playing in the bath while Sirena supervises her, the toys I bought providing an excitement for the little girl I hadn't counted on hitting me as deep as it is.

"Food is ready whenever my girls are." Cheesy? Absolutely, but the way it makes them both giggle is the only thing that matters to me.

"I think the bath and meds are really helping. She's much less flushed than earlier, and her chest doesn't sound as gunky. Don't you think?" Sirena's looking at me as though I have the answers, and fuck, if that doesn't make every part of me swell with pride and affection. I want her to always consider me as her first resource when she needs something. This is a good start.

"Definitely. Shortstack, we haven't formally met yet. I'm Jonah Taylor, and I work with your mom."

"Cuz you're her bossy boss." My little girl giggles and extends her hand to meet where I've got mine outstretched. Yeah, my little girl. I said what I said. I don't know, or care, where whoever the sperm donor who helped to create her is. Lavender Reed is as much mine as her mama is. The heart knows what it knows, and mine's never felt such immediate and overwhelming love as it does for these two.

"Wanna know a little secret?" I beckon her closer, and when she's at my side, I lift her into the chair at the table where she clearly sits most often. It's got a colorful plastic placemat featuring Teen Titan cartoon superheroes all over it. I lean over to mock-whisper in her ear, loud enough for Sirena to hear me as our eyes meet over her daughter's head.

“Your mama’s the real bossy boss. I want her to be happy, so whatever she says, goes.” I hold my breath, hoping Sirena won’t tell me to leave. I will if she wants me to, but I don’t know if I can make myself stay gone. Whatever it takes to woo her, I’m going to do it.

“Mm-hmm, we’ll see.” Sirena’s eye roll makes me chuckle.

Any other time, I’d want to kiss every inch of Sirena’s blushing skin. For now, it’s everything just to sit at her dinner table and share a meal with her and Lavender. The little girl’s head droops lower and lower over her food until she’s nearly nose deep in her soup. Wisely, Sirena had her put on her jammies when she got out of the bath.

“Let’s take her temp one more time, and then I’ll help you get her to bed.”

Sirena’s nod is grateful as she rises to go grab the thermometer. I know it goes against the grain for her to accept help. The longer I’m here the more I’m recalling the many times when she could have leaned on any number of her coworkers at Loft for help, and instead, she fought to handle everything on her own. Regret presses in on me, knowing that I would have found out about her daughter and been able to help long before now if I’d followed the advice of the guys and pried into her life.

Still, I can’t bring myself to completely regret the time that’s passed. Sirena’s had time to get to know me without the pressure of being in a relationship with me. I’m hopeful that will help her to trust and believe me when I promise her I’m not going anywhere and she can rely on me.

“I planned on keeping her in bed with me tonight, so I can keep an eye on her. Will you lay her down there?”

I lift the tiny body into my arms, her humid breath washing over my neck as she curls against me.

Paternal love floods through me, binding my soul to hers. There’s no rational thought process or growth nudging me along, just pure instinctive recognition of who these two are to

me. I look over at Sirena where she's waiting beside her bed. It feels as if the ground is still shaking beneath me as my entire universe reorders itself around this new family.

Her stormy gray eyes are liquid with wonder as she watches Lavender and me. I can't tell if she feels this moment as deeply as I do. I can only hope. Once I have Lav all tucked in under the worn coverlet on the bed, I motion with my head for Sirena to follow me out.

I walk all the way to the door, fighting the impulse to allow my feet to chart a path anywhere but there. I know Sirena's had a stressful evening, and my showing up to help might have made things easier in the short term, but she needs time to process. If there's anything I've learned from having younger sisters and from watching the guys at Loft fall for Lumi and Marlyce, it's that some things can't be rushed.

I'm pushing Sirena past her comfort zone by barging into her very private life. If I don't give her time to think things through and get comfortable with the idea of the family I want to make with her, I'll set my cause back even further. Much as it sucks to leave tonight, especially when I want to help her unwind and also watch over Lavender, I know she needs me to go.

"Bunny, lock up behind me. I know Fitzzy makes sure this place is as safe as anywhere on earth, but I'm gonna worry until I can be on the other side of the door protecting you two for myself every night." I can't help the gruff command. She may have been looking out for the two of them on her own, but they're my girls now. I allow myself a soft kiss against her temple. The tickle of baby hairs that have escaped her messy bun brushing against my lips does more to turn me on than the sultriest moves of any partner I've had in the years before I met her.

I take the stairs down to the lobby in hopes of working off some of the pent-up arousal still burning me up inside. At the bottom of the main level stairs, watching me descend as though she ordained my appearance, is Fitzzy in all her glory.

The woman is half adorably sweet nana, half fire-breathing dragon, one hundred percent menace. When she claims a stool at the Loft's bar rail, we always know we're in for a wild night. She could start a brawl just as easily as decide to perform an impromptu wedding.

That's no exaggeration, she's done both. It's how Lumi and Cal tied the knot in fact. I don't care if it costs me my manly man card, I silently wish she'll decide to help me win Sirena's love.

"JT, don't you dare try sneaking out of my building without stopping by for a chat!" I haven't been called JT since I was barely old enough to shave the fuzz from my upper lip. Doesn't make a lick of difference to Fitzy.

"Ma'am?"

"Don't give me that *ma'am* shit, boy. Get over here and tell me the truth. You were up at Sirena's place tonight. Weren't you?" The husky rasp of her voice hints at a past no one dares ask her about. I give a chin lift, uncertain where she's going with this line of questioning, but positive I won't let her warn me off from pursuing Sirena.

"Good. Girl needs people in her corner, and you come from good folks. You do right by those two. Hear me? And you don't go spreading her secrets to everybody at that little club of yours, either. Girl needs a place to go where she can be a young woman and not simply somebody's mama."

Encouraged and scolded all at once, I give Fitzy my solemn vow. The last thing I'll ever do is carelessly bring Sirena or Lavender any pain. I only want to love them. Both of them.

CHAPTER 8



SIRENA

Lavender's warm little body is squished up against mine when the sunlight peeking through the blinds wakes me. Even though it feels as if I'm lying next to a furnace, she doesn't feel feverishly hot anymore. I woke to check her temperature a few times during the night, and each time, it was getting closer and closer to normal. Thank the universe for that. My baby girl being sick has been the worst feeling in the world. Fear and responsibility weigh so heavy on my shoulders.

I'm really lucky she's been such a healthy little kid. Insurance premiums are so far outside the budget it's laughable. It takes me most of the year to pay off each well child visit and checkup. Add in the worry about how to juggle everything when she gets sick, and it's no wonder my hands are shaking even now. Useless to wish for things that'll never be, but damn, it would be nice to have a mother who could help me navigate this shit. What's the saying? If wishes were ponies, beggars would ride? I think that's it.

The quiet buzz of my phone vibrating on the table next to my bed is the only warning I have before a quiet knock at the door has me rushing to untangle myself from Lav's octopus wraparound. I scoop up the phone as I tiptoe from my room and check to see nearly a dozen text messages. I skip the ones from the girls at Loft and go straight to Jonah's name.

Don't freak out. My mom's on her way to your place. I tried to stall her. She's insisting, and I can't tell her no.

I look through the peephole to see a woman I don't recognize standing in front of a tall man who looks like an older version of Jonah.

Oh, and my dad will probably follow her because since he retired. It's practically all he does. I'm really sorry. I'll be there asap!

It's adorable that he can't tell his mom no. It's nerve wracking to have his mom on the other side of my door. I look down at my toes and realize I'm in my sleep shorts and a tank top. Nerves explode into mortification.

I can't open the door! I'm in pajamas! I hurry and text back. Seconds later, the sound of a phone ringing in the hall outside my condo breaks the silence.

"Jonah? What? Jammies? Oh who cares about pajamas? Your father and I raised nearly a half dozen of you monsters. I couldn't care less if your girl's in her jammies. Tell her we'll wait while she gets dressed, but this breakfast casserole is best eaten while warm."

Dancing bubbles in the text window let me know Jonah's passing along her message. Which is amusing considering I'm fairly sure the whole floor heard everything. I crack the door open, the safety chain keeping it from swinging wide, and peek through the sliver of space.

"Um, Mrs. Taylor?"

"It's Bonnie, sweetheart. Or Mom. Whichever you feel comfortable with." Her round face is rosy, and even her eyes are bright with her grin. Behind her, Jonah's dad is alternating between casting curious looks through the narrow space at me and smiling down at his wife. I'm charmed and unnerved all at once, and it occurs to me I have yet to respond to his mom.

"Okay, um, Bonnie. Do you mind if I just run and get dressed real fast? Lavender is still asleep, but she was up a few times during the night, so she'll probably sleep for a while still."

"That's fine, honey! We'll be as quiet as mice in a cattery. Fitzy already told us all about your sweet lil one, and we just can't wait to meet her!" Somehow, I don't think quiet and Bonnie Taylor are well acquainted. It's almost too good to be true how I only minutes ago wished I had a mom to support me, and poof! here's a fairy godmother.

I toss on a pair of sweatpants and a baggy hoodie, wanting to be comfortable for the day and knowing if I put on fancy

clothes to try to impress Jonah's parents now, I'll be changing as soon as they're gone. Which means more laundry. Brokelife adulting has taught me to never dirty more clothes than necessary because detergent is expensive. Plus, folding laundry is the worst.

Opening the door, I find not only his mom and dad somewhat, sort of, patiently waiting, but Jonah bursts through the door of the stairway like a superhero on a mission. He's panting and out of breath as if he's been running for miles, but the rueful smile on his face still manages to be sexy.

"Good, you didn't let them in yet." He's wheezing a bit, and I can't hold back my laughter.

From Lumi, I know the guys all work out together every morning. Jonah's drenched in more sweat than rushing to my place could cause and wearing gym shorts, sneakers and a thin T-shirt despite the late fall chill. I wonder if he actually ran here from the gym downtown.

"Ma, you couldn't have waited a couple hours?" He gives me a wink before dropping his brows into a scowl he shoots her way. Mr. Taylor puts a hand on his wife's shoulder and mock scowls right back at his son.

There's a lighthearted enjoyment between them, even when harassing each other. It reminds me of the way families act on the sitcoms that play on cable after school. I've always sort of believed relationships like that are pure Hollywood fantasy.

"Breakfast casserole, Jonah Bernard Taylor. Breakfast. If I'd waited 'til you wanted me to, it'd be lunch casserole, and that makes zero sense. Don't you argue with me."

She's smiling and glaring at him simultaneously, and it's more than I can take. And seriously, Bernard? I'm quaking with laughter and whipping my head back and forth to keep up with their banter when I feel a little body plaster itself against my back.

"Mommy, what smells good?" So much for quiet. We woke Lavender. Realizing that reminds me we're probably

bothering the neighbors, too. I step backward, dragging Lav to the side with me, and gesture for everyone to come in.

Over breakfast, which is more amazing than anything in a single baking dish has a right to be, we all get to know one another. It takes less than ten minutes for Bonnie to have Lavender calling her and Jared Nana and Pop. The eagerness in her latching on to them gives me a sharp twist of guilt in my chest.

I hate that my circumstances and choices have kept our circle so small. My daughter deserves to have all the love and family in the world. Instead, she just has me. As though he senses the pain I'm trying desperately to hide, Jonah wraps his arm around my shoulders from his chair next to mine and leans in to whisper into my ear.

"She's an amazing little girl, Bunny. Look how in love with her my folks are. You're a great mama."

Bonnie catches my eye and gives me one of her bright smiles, taking in how close her son is to me. Her approval pours over me, sealing gaps and filling holes I've lived with for years. Her hands clap together like an excited preschool teacher, and all of our forks freeze while we watch her bouncing happily.

"I have an idea!" It's impossible not to share her smile.

"Jared and I can take Lavender home with us for the day since her fever yesterday means no school today! I can keep an eye on her. Make sure it's really just a quick bug. That way you two can run errands and Sirena won't have to miss work tonight!"

Bonnie told me during breakfast that she recently retired from being the school nurse of all things. If I can rely on anyone to help with a still somewhat sick kiddo, it would be her. Right?

Jonah squeezes my shoulder and leans over to whisper again. "You don't have to say yes. She won't be mad if you want to keep Shortstack here for the day and call out again tonight."

“Mommy, Pop has a train set in his dude cave! He said I can flip the track switch! Please can I go there?” Her breathing sounds much easier today, and her fever’s gone down completely. That guilty pang about keeping our circle smaller than my baby deserves prods at me.

“Okay, but can I at least bring over dinner for everyone, so we can see each other before she goes to bed over there? We’ve never spent a night apart.”

“That would be perfect, sweetheart.” His mom practically coos at me. It’s blatantly obvious she’s considering my daughter to be family at this point. It doesn’t feel like a stretch to think she considers me that way, too. Foreign as the feeling is, I love it. I’m going to hold on to it for as long as I can.

Something tells me, even if things don’t work out between me and Jonah the way he seems to think they will, Bonnie and Jared aren’t going to let Lavender or me go.

CHAPTER 9



JONAH

I wanted to be mad at my folks for barging over here and hogging my girls this morning. I had planned to head here after working out to make them breakfast, but Ma beat me to it. Every minute that goes by proves my mom knows what she's doing, though.

Tension and strain have held Sirena's shoulders tightly squared against the world since I met her. I never knew why and was trying to give her time to warm up to me, so I could learn her secrets on her terms. Her absence from work last night pushed that timetable out of her hands, and my mom's done the rest.

As much as I want to be the only one showering my girls in love and affection, it's obvious watching them bloom under my mother's care that they'll benefit from being pulled into the whole Taylor squad. My girls need family, and my parents have planted their flag and made it obvious they're claiming Sirena and Lavender whether I manage to or not.

As if that's even an option. Last night set my path in stone, and every moment forward is simply solidifying it more.

"Snookie, why don't you go pick out some clothes to put on after we brush your teeth and do your hair. Then we'll pack a bag for overnight. If you get scared or want to talk to me tho —"

"We'll call your phone, and you can come right over and get her," Ma cuts in, making it clear Sirena will never be out of reach for her daughter. Everyone's smiling, even Sirena, as my girls hustle down the short hallway to get Lavender ready to leave with my folks.

"Your mom just got you nearly an entire day alone with your woman, son. Don't waste it." My dad's serious tone my dad, reserved for only the most important lectures, is proof positive he's as charmed by Sirena and my Shortstack as I am.

“Your father’s right, Jonah. You kids have already made me wait longer than is fair for grandbabies. Lavender is my reward for the patience y’all have forced me to show. You better not mess this up, Jonah Bernard Taylor, because those two are my girls now!”

I really hope Sirena is prepared for the tornado that is Bonnie Taylor. I don’t think an apocalypse can shake the woman once she’s declared herself.

“Yes, ma’am.” Because really, what else can I say?



Errands with Sirena are more fun than they should be. Every stop we make, I take the opportunity to open the door for her and let my hands caress and hold her. Every hour that passes brings us closer together as she relaxes and leans into me more and more.

“Anything left to take care of today?” We’ve been to the grocery store, the pharmacy, the dry cleaner, and the post office. Being a pack-mule and fetcher-of-things has never been this fulfilling. Sirena’s laughing and smiling, and she let me buy her lunch with no argument.

“Nope. Welcome to the world of ‘single moms who work nights and weekends, thus taking care of all their errands during the school day.’ It’s easier now that Lav’s in school; that’s for sure.” Her smile is sheepish, as if she’s waiting for the moment something critical or judgmental pops out of my mouth. It’ll be a long time before that ever happens.

“Great, what are your thoughts on going back to your place and letting me cook you dinner so we can watch a movie and relax?” Did I just invite myself over to her place? Yeah. I fuckin’ did. I’ll make no apologies for it, either. Sirena’s never had trouble telling me no any other time, so I’m confident she’ll kick my ass to the curb when she’s had enough of me for the day. Then I’ll give her a day or two and show up again.

I’m typically the sort to take a woman at her word when she says she’s not interested, but Sirena’s never once said that.

She's told me she 'can't,' or that she 'shouldn't,' and now that I've met Lavender and heard some from my girl about her circumstances, I get it. My sweet bunny's been too busy and overwhelmed being the best damn mom she can be for a relationship with a man.

Thank fuck for that. It means she's not weighed down by any fuckers I need to scare off. And she's smart enough to avoid casual hookups where she works. All of which added up to her thinking we weren't meant to be.

It's a good thing I know better. There's nothing casual or temporary about us, and I'm going to make sure her burdens and obligations are lightened, not increased. Not only because that's the sort of man my parents raised me to be, but because I'm going to be the man Sirena and Lavender deserve in their lives.

"You're going to cook? For me? What about our shifts? We both have work tonight." A skeptic, I see. She's in for a surprise.

"Yeah, Bunny. You pick the movies and the blanket for being snuggled under. I'll make you dinner and do the snuggling. I'm the boss, and I'm giving us the night off. We'll play hooky together." Might as well make my intentions perfectly clear. I've had an achingly hard cock nearly the entire day. Even if we only fool around tonight, there's absolutely no chance on earth I'm ending the night without getting a taste of her.

I help Sirena into my truck, thankful for heated seats and fast working heaters when I notice how cold her skin is under my hands. I make a mental note to make sure both my girls have cold weather gear. It'll be Christmas soon, but I don't want to wait 'til then to ensure they're warm enough. Bourbon might not be the arctic, but it gets pretty cold here in the winter.

The main lobby at Fitzpatrick Place is always filled with activity. It's unlike anywhere I've ever lived, and I have to admit, I'm glad for the solitude I find at my place just a few miles outside city limits. I know Cal's happy to have his place

about a half mile down the road from mine, especially now that he's got Lumi living out there, too. I've spent a fair amount of time around these condos, though, most especially as Callum, Liam, and Marlyce all convinced their women to partner up with them and move out of here.

I swear I spend more time moving boxes and furniture in and out of this place than is reasonable. Fitzzy claims it's because she's the best matchmaker in the state. I can only hope that's true and she's working the angles here, because I can't go back to just being Sirena's boss.

"A-he-he-he-hem." Sure enough, there's the Grande Dame herself, holding court in the room and directing the flurry of residents who are helping to decorate. By the time she's done, I'm betting the whole room will look as if the North Pole relocated. I bet Lavender will love it.

Once Fitz is positive I'm looking at her, she points her index and middle fingers at her eyes, then brings them together and twists them to point at me. Message received, Fitzzy. Message received.

CHAPTER 10



SIRENA

“What the heck is Fitz doing?” She’s the most batshit, unpredictably wild person I’ve met in my whole life. I wanna be like her when I’m old. She’s always doing exactly as she pleases, and not a lick of what she doesn’t want to do. When folks call her out, she plays the ‘I’m old and feeble. I can’t help it’ card. Even though the woman’s liable to live forever.

“She’s issuing a warning, Bunny. One I’m willing to lay down my life to uphold.” All day, Jonah’s been playful and flirty, so this serious vow he’s making catches me off guard. He nods back to her and places his fist over his heart like some sort of knight about to go into battle.

“I don’t get it?” I can’t help but feel a little put out that she’s my landlady, but the two of them are managing to have an entire conversation without words that I’m clueless about.

“You have no idea, do you?” It’s a rhetorical question, but yeah, I’m lost.

Jonah leads me to the elevator, and once the doors close behind us, pulls me into his arms. His chin rests on the crown of my head as his fingers push under my sweater to stroke the rounded curve of my tummy. Maybe, I’d feel self-conscious if I hadn’t spent months watching him covertly drool all over my curves as I danced on my platform at Loft. Besides all that history, there’s the extremely obvious push of his rock-hard erection against my lower back.

“You’ve spent years going through life with no one truly at your back. And I won’t lie, Bunny. I’m so amazed and proud of your strength. But the day you and your little girl moved in here, you gained Fitzy in your corner. She didn’t tell any of us at your work about your daughter, because she knew it was a boundary for you. She protected your secret. You might not realize it, but you’ve had Lumi, Marlyce and Jade standing

behind you for months. The fellas, too. They might not understand why you've held yourself a little apart from them, but believe me when I promise you I've endured countless lectures from them about how I'd better be good to you."

My whole body feels as if it's shaking in a tornado as moments in time, when unexplainable things have happened around here to make my life easier, slot into place in my mind. It's been Fitzy, in the background, making things better for Lavender and me. Times when I know Lumi's rushed to trade shifts with me if my schedule's been mixed up. Even when Liam and Casyn insisted on pulling me into the security office to tell me they'd get Jonah to leave me alone if I wanted them to.

Tears well in my eyes and spill onto my cheeks as I think about how blind I've been. How stubborn. All this time, I insisted on painting the people around me by the experiences of my past, and they've just been supporting me despite myself. It's too much.

"Now, you've got my folks, and Sirena, you've got me. Even if all you ever accept from me is friendship, I'm yours. I'll be there for you and Lavender until you tell me I can't be anymore. Then I'll figure out how to be there for you both from the sidelines. Because as much as I'm yours, Bunny, you two are mine."

"We've never even kissed. How can you know there's enough chemistry to say I'm yours?" I haven't let myself get close to a man since I was with Lavender's biological father, and what did I know? I was barely even a teenager. I haven't been intimate with a guy since she was a toddler and I was still in high school.

"I can answer that question right here and now." Jonah turns us until I'm facing him and presses me against the cool metal wall of the elevator. One of his hands cradles the small of my back and arches me into his chest while the other moves to cup my chin. He tilts my head to the side and presses his lips over mine in featherlight caresses. Over and over, he moves his lips over me, kissing my lips, my jaw, my cheeks. He rubs the tip of his nose against mine before sliding along

the side of my neck and nibbling at the sensitive hollow behind my ear.

Jonah returns to my mouth, and this time, his tongue licks along the seam of my lips to encourage them to open for him. I give him entry, and he capitalizes on it immediately, thrusting his tongue into the cavern of my mouth and stroking along my own tongue. Our groans mingle in the air nearly loud enough to drown out the repetitive binging of the elevator door, indicating we've gotten to my floor. I was so intent on our kiss I hadn't even realized he'd jammed his finger into the door open button to hold it in place.

"Asked and answered." I hardly recognize my voice. It's so husky with arousal. It may be a long time since I've had a partner, but it's *never* felt like this before. His laugh rumbles through him and vibrates clear to my heart.

Just like that, I know it's all going to be okay. Jonah leads the way to my condo door and cuddles behind me while I dig through my purse for the keys. Packages surround our feet and I feel a little bad for the way I've loaded him down with stuff to carry for me all afternoon. I thought I was hungry for the dinner he promised to make, but after that kiss, I'm starving for something else entirely.

"What if we skip dinner and go straight to dessert?" Call me immature, but midnight snacking after an evening of lovemaking sounds like exactly what I'm craving.

CHAPTER 11



JONAH

Sirena's brilliant idea to skip right to the good part has precum flooding my boxer briefs. I'm making a mental note that it's precum and not actual jizz. The memory of nutting myself the minute she suggests having sex is not one I want. Shit's embarrassing. Accurate but embarrassing.

"You sure, Bunny?" Please, let her be sure. I need to get this woman under me like I need to breathe. Then I need her over me. And on her knees in front of me. If I hadn't felt at least three solid pulses of cum surging out of me moments ago, I might not be so surprised by how swollen and achy my cock feels. As it is, I could almost come again, already.

"I'm never sure of much, but I'm sure about this."

The sting of hot tears burns my nose and cheeks, love blazing like a wildfire through my whole being. The strength and power of my feelings for her is so much, almost more than I can bear.

I lift her into my arms and carry her, bridal style, into the dark of her condo. The path from the door to her bed is quick, and I take time only to make sure the door is locked behind us and to let Sirena drop her purse on the sofa as we pass it. The nightlight in the hallway casts her face in a gentle glow, her smile lighting me up brighter than any bulb could.

"Tell me you're sure this isn't a one off. That you understand once I have you, I'm never letting you go." For months, I've gone at her pace. I've been content to let her stall me because she wasn't ready for the forever I've always had in mind for us. Now that I've got the greenlight to love her, there's no holding back. I want every last bit of her, and I want it right this second.

"I'm sure." Just past the threshold of her bedroom, she kicks off her shoes and wraps her arms around my neck, her

face tucked against my throat. I flip the switch to turn on the ceiling light, making it bright as day in here.

For months, my cock's been strangling in my pants while she teases and taunts me with all her thick curves. I'm damned if I'll miss out on the view tonight. I'll finally see every millimeter of skin that hides behind the corsets and briefs she wears in the cage. I'm going to kiss, lick, and suck each sumptuous dimple and rounded slope of her soft, ripe flesh.

"Been dreaming about these nipples, Bunny. And how they'll feel in my palms. What color are they, hmm? I bet they'll be so dark and purply-red when I get done sucking on them." My eyes are trained on the swoopy dip of her baggy sweater where it reveals the top of her cleavage. My knees bump the edge of her mattress, and I drop her gently onto the worn quilt that covers her sheets.

I don't take time to pull back the covers or do anything other than worship her body. As eager as I am, Sirena pulls the sweater over her head and reaches behind her back to unclasp her bra. I'm frozen in place when the plain blue fabric drops onto her lap and her breasts bounce free. Each perfect globe is enough to overfill my massive hands, and as I heft them in my palms, her nipples crinkle into firm gumdrops.

I drop to my knees next to the bed. Her legs spread wide as I nudge my way between them. I tip my head forward and lick a circle around each nipple, leaving them shiny and wet. I move from side to side, licking and blowing cool air over each areola until her hands thread through my hair, so she can anchor me against her right breast. I lift it higher against my mouth, the pillow of soft flesh mounding between my fingers as I suckle in as much as I can.

My other hand plucks at the nipple not currently in my mouth. Her fingers scratch along my scalp as she presses me deeper into her tit. Lust for her consumes me, and my movements become more forceful. Sirena's hands clutch at me desperately, but I'm in charge here, and I need to slow this down before I waste any more of the cum churning in my balls for her.

“Slow down, Bunny. We have all night.”

“Speak for yourself, Jonah. It’s been so long. I need you!” At her urging, I push her backward onto the bed until I can crawl over her to straddle her thighs. The temptation of her tits still drives me to near madness, and I lean forward to lick the silvery lines that curl around the outside of her nipples like frames.

She’s so sensitive I wonder if I can make her come with breast play alone. I’ll have to try it some other time. The scent of her need rises between us, and my tongue tingles with the craving to taste her. I’m grateful she changed into leggings before we left earlier, because I’m not confident my hands are steady enough to fiddle with buttons and zippers. As it is, I nearly rip the buttery soft cotton as I tug it down her hips and legs, taking along her panties.

I want to remember my performance tonight as being suave and skilled, but I’m pretty certain the only benchmarks I’m hitting are desperation and devotion. I need to make her come a few times before I get inside her, because I have zero confidence I’ll be able to last.

I move between her knees once I get her completely undressed. From where I’m kneeling, the peaks and rises of her belly and breasts form the perfect landscape to my personal nirvana.

“Fuck me, Bunny. I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than you on your back for me. Naked. Pussy all bare and glistening. Waiting for my mouth.” The filthy words have her squirming beneath me, and I make a mental note to keep giving her all the nasty needs she inspires in me.

I figured she likely keeps things pretty trimmed down here. The costumes the dancers wear are tasteful but sensual, and I’ve heard the girls chatting in the break room enough times about how they landscape and which methods work best. All the overheard gossip and girl talk in the world couldn’t prepare me for the sight I see, right now.

The tiniest tuft of dark brown curls are perched at the top of her mons, just above the split of her puffy lower lips. My

hands grasp her inner thighs and nudge her legs into a wide split. I watch as the distance pulls until those little, pink cushions unfurl to reveal her deep rosy center. Standing tall between her parted labia, her clit rises like a hooded monument to hedonism.

“Please, Jonah, please.”

One day, I want to make Sirena beg me, but right now, I need to make her come as much as possible to get her ready for me. Logically, I know she’s given birth, so she can handle my size and then some. Earlier today, she mentioned it’s been a really long time, though, and I don’t want to hurt her.

I lick alongside her clit, sucking one plump lip into my mouth at a time before releasing them with a pop. Sirena grunts each time I let go, her hips wiggling to angle her clit to my lips. I don’t give her what she wants just yet. She needs to build to the orgasms I’m going to push her through.

“Jonah!” Her growl is nearly my undoing. I swirl my tongue around the sensitive bud, working the shaft from all sides until I can sweep my tongue under and over it in tight infinity tangles. Juice flows from her tight little slit, rolling back toward her asshole, and my nuts turn to stone when the flash of taking her there hits me.

“Come for me, Sirena. Come all over your man’s face. Right now.” I suck and eat at her relentlessly as her body clenches up and nearly bucks me off the bed. I ride out her orgasm with gentle licks. Using the flat of my tongue, I scoop up as much of her creamy cum as I can manage, until her body is loose and relaxed beneath me. Only then do I nibble my way back up her body until I can share her flavor with her in a deep kiss.

“You’re a goddess when you come for me.” She’s beautiful every second, but there’s something revelatory about the moment when she reaches her peak for me. A realization that I need moments like this for the rest of my life. Every day, preferably.

CHAPTER 12



SIRENA

Jonah's weight over me feels better than anything I've ever experienced with a partner. It definitely puts anything I've experienced at my own hand to shame. I think I'm already getting addicted to the way he worships my body, bathing praise and adoration over every bit of me.

"I'm clean, but once I get inside you, I won't be able to pull out, Bunny. Do you need me to suit up?"

I have no idea when or how Jonah got undressed, but he's kneeling over me naked and gloriously male. He's so big I would have felt dainty next to him even when I was about to pop with Lavender all those years ago. He definitely has me feeling feminine and protected with the way he carries me around and positions me how he wants me.

Momentarily distracted by the view of him naked and hard, I miss what he asked. His body is like granite, and it's all for me. His cock stabs into the air between us, rising to his navel and thick enough I have a very authentic concern he might not fit. It's been years since much of anything beyond a tampon or a couple of my fingers were inside me. Jonah's dick is definitely not a 'back in the saddle' sort of ride.

"Oh...hmm?" What was he asking?

"Condom, Bunny. Do I need one?" His eyes probe mine, and I can tell he's biting his tongue.

"What? Do you want to wear one? I've been tested a few years ago, and I haven't been with anyone since then."

"Do I..." He seems at a loss for words. I've never seen that before. "Do I want to wear a condom? Fuck, no, baby. I don't want a thing between us. Ever. But you had your choices stolen once before, and even though having more babies with you is very much in my plans, I won't take your choice away from you."

Thick cum spurts from his tip when he says he plans to have babies with me, and I'm hypnotized watching it dribble down the ridges and veins along the side of his shaft. I quick swipe my finger through the slippery river it's making and bring the digit to my lips. Tasting him with my tongue poked out has more pulsing out of him and a groan ripping out of his chest, so deep he sounds like a wounded animal.

"Bunny..." It's a benediction and a warning.

"No condom. I want to feel you come inside me." It's true. I think I might die if I don't get to feel him pumping his hot release as deep into me as it can go.

"Does that mean I'm breeding you right here and now? Because Sirena, I'll do it. You'll leave this bed pregnant with our second baby, and I'll be happy as Santa on December twenty-sixth."

Even burning alive with needy lust, he makes me laugh. I reach back down to his erection and wrap my fingers as far around his girth as they go, tugging him forward until his broad mushroom tip slicks back and forth against my clit.

"I'm on the pill, so no breeding tonight. But we can practice."

"Fuck, yeah, we can. I love you so much, Bunny." His hips punch forward until the broad flare of his head pops inside me, my muscles clenching around him immediately. We both moan at the perfection until Jonah's cock splits me wide and fills me beyond rational thought or sound. He's so deep inside me I can feel him everywhere.

Even my throat feels full, though it's probably full with the emotion of this moment. For the first time in my life, I'm where I belong and I have everything I need. Jonah's hips pull back until the very end of him is at my opening, my needy, grasping pussy kissing at his tip. Sucking at it to pull him back.

He plunges back inside, filling me so full once again, with a dip and swivel at the end that grinds his base against my clit and bumps his head into the spongy g-spot along the front wall

of my core. Wet slapping sounds overtake the rasping breaths we're sharing as his thrusts get faster and harder. He's braced on his elbows above me, his lips coasting all along my face and neck.

"Rub your clit for me. I want you to soak my cock with your cum, so I can fill you up. Pretend we're making a baby right now, and your little pussy is going to suck up every last drop of cum I give it."

He's so filthy. His demands compel my fingers to obey before my brain even processes the directions. Immediately, my hand slips between us to work the stiff bud between my middle and ring fingers. Every time he pushes deep, his base forces my fingers to pinch over my aching clit until I'm blind with the pleasure of it.

"Come right now, Bunny. Right fucking now."

As if my body had waited for his command, my orgasm crashes over me. Muscles I wasn't sure even exist lock up tight as euphoria batters me from all sides. Jonah's hips stutter between my thighs, and a flood of heat floods my core until it's splashing out between us.

Careful not to smooch me, Jonah rolls to the side and flops on his back. We both sighed a bit as he pulled out of me. Shiny and soaked, his cock still twitches and stands at full mast like a flagpole rising toward the ceiling. I can't stop the giggle that bursts out of me, and Jonah rolls to his side with a grin.

"Oh you think that's funny, do you? How do you think it feels to have the damn thing hard for hours and hours every night while I watch you working? Knowing everything it wanted in the world was dressed like the sexiest siren in the universe but was still out of reach?"

"Well, I don't know about all the universe, but I'm right here now. Within reach. Right?"

His fingers are firm but gentle as he reaches over to tweak my nipple, drawing it into a hard little peak.

"You'll never be out of reach again, Bunny. Call me a tortoise for taking as long as I have to catch you, but you're all

mine now. Mine forever and always. Now, close your eyes and get some sleep. Morning will be here soon, and it's a school day for our little girl. We need to be at my folk's house before seven if we want to have breakfast with Lavender and get her dropped off."

"Oh, shit! Jonah! We totally blew off dinner at their place tonight! Do you think Lavender's upset? Is your mom mad?" In all the years I've been a mom, nothing and no one has ever distracted me from my duty to my daughter. Shame and panic clench my stomach into a tight ball.

"Relax, Bunny. My dad messaged a few hours ago. Lav tired herself out playing and is still a bit sleepy from being so restless last night. They fed her an early supper and put her to bed before we even got here. I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away. I was selfishly enjoying how carefree and relaxed you've been."

Letting Jonah talk me into playing hooky from work is one thing. Allowing others to look after my baby girl can't be a habit. When I tell him it can't happen again, instead of arguing, Jonah agrees and promises never to keep information about her from me again. His easy acceptance of my demand reassures me.

"I love you, Sirena. And as fast as it may seem, I love Lavender. Fate brought you both to me, and I promise I'll do whatever it takes to be the father she deserves and the man you trust to provide for and love you both. Plus any brothers or sisters we give her."

My heart recognizes his sincerity. The way he honors my priorities and respects the challenges I've fought to be a good mom. Sharing the challenges of the future with him is safe, because I know he'll always do his best to do right by us, even if he doesn't get it right. Even if I don't get it exactly right, either. Together, we're perfect.

EPILOGUE



CHRISTMAS MORNING

JONAH

“**M**ommy! Jonah! He came! And there’s *so many presents!*” Lavender bursts through the door to Sirena and my bedroom as she’s done nearly every morning since I convinced my girls to move in. Not a day goes by without a bright-eyed wake up from my favorite little girl bouncing into the room and pouncing up onto the California king sized bed her mother and I share.

It’s not the wake up I’d envisioned for myself this Christmas morning when the year started. It’s light years better. My girls bring more love and light to my life than I had any idea even existed before I met them.

“Is that so? Well, do you think your mom and I ought to get out of bed then?” Teasing her is one of my favorite things to do because she teases right back. I keep hoping she’ll slip one of these days while she’s teasing me and call me Daddy. Hasn’t happened yet, so I’m trying to be patient.

“Yes, yes, *yes!*” She jumps from the bed and races down the hallway, shouting instructions for her mom and I as she goes.

“Well, I guess that’s our cue.” I try to sound relaxed, but today is so important. I’ve been wrestling with anxiety for weeks, worrying about how today will go. I climb out of bed and shrug into the thick velour robe Sirena loves to pet while she sits in my lap every morning. I hold out her robe for her to slip into it, and then together, we follow Lavender’s path down the hallway to the den.

Decorating the house has never been as intricate and in depth as it was this year. Lav had very definite ideas about

what should go where, and what we needed to add. She's insisted for weeks now that we needed to have snow boots and waterproof fleecy pants ready to put on for Christmas morning. She swears up and down it's because Santa always, *always* brings her what she wants most. This year, I paid off the mall Santa to snitch and tell me what she'd asked for.

My baby girl wants a white Christmas from Santa. Sirena doesn't know it yet, but since this is my first Christmas in a fatherly role, I was damned sure I'd be doing whatever it takes to make sure my baby girl gets everything she wants. Which is why the house's speakers have been blasting holiday tunes for hours to mask the noise of Cal, Liam, and Casyn working snow machines to make artificial snow all over our lawn.

"I can't believe Santa really did it. Look! He brought me my second wish! It's snowing!"

Wait. Second wish? Panic rushes through me at the realization that the prick in the cheap Santa suit at the mall lied to me. All this, and snow wasn't even her most important Santa request? Anxiety boils like acid in my stomach as Sirena gives me a small smile.

"You really asked Santa to bring you snow for Christmas, Snookie?" Sirena's handling this crisis much more calmly than I am. What the fuck are we supposed to do when Lav decides it's time to get her number one Santa present? Stores aren't open today.

Christmas is ruined. It's a damn good thing I got them both dozens of presents already, because my big plans for asking them to marry me and make me part of their family sure as shit can't happen today. My heart hurts so much I could cry. Maybe, this is what a stroke feels like. Failure isn't a feeling I'm used to, and it sucks. Belatedly, I realize Lav is explaining her Christmas wishes to her mother, and I try to pay attention through my sadness.

"Well, I had to introvize on account of—"

"Introvize?" Sirena's as confused as I am, apparently. Even if she's not brokenhearted like me.

“You know, like how you were gonna have macaroni for dinner, but there’s no milk, so instead you improvise and have peanut butter jelly sandwiches?”

“Oh! You mean *improvise*.”

“Yeah, that. I had to do that on account of Auntie Fitzzy already brought me what I wanted most this year.” Fitzzy? The only thing I’ve seen Fitzzy give anyone this year is heartburn and sass.

“What did Aunt Fitzzy bring you?” If my voice sounds as if I just got run over and stomped by a dozen feral reindeer, it’s cuz I feel like I have been.

“A daddy. Auntie Fitzzy brought me a daddy, just like I told her I was gonna ask Santa for. She said she knew just the right daddy for me, and that I’d know him when I met him. Then there you were, right when I was sick and needed a daddy most in all my life.”

I’m not crying. Okay, I’m crying, but it’s impossible not to be crying. Sirena’s got tears all down her face, too, and Lavender’s looking back and forth between us as if we’ve lost the plot. If this is parenthood, it’s no wonder they say only the strong survive. Shit, my heart still feels half trampled and half as if it’s about to soar out of my chest into the ozone.

“You are my daddy, right?” Lavender launches herself into my arms and topples me back onto my ass. Soft sniffles beside me get louder as Sirena kneels next to us and brushes back her daughter’s bangs.

“I want to be your daddy more than I’ve ever wanted anything in all my life, Shortstack. You’re the best Christmas gift anyone ever gave me.”

Her little arms wind around my neck as I reach over and pull Sirena into our hug. My perfect little family is complete. Now, I just need to make it legal.

I lift Lavender to her feet and gesture to a pair of small boxes balanced on side-by-side branches in the tree.

“Grab those presents for me, please, kiddo?”

She runs and skids to a stop in front of all the brightly wrapped packages. Tucked against the greenery, amidst all the lights and baubles, the little red velvet boxes blend in, but she spots them immediately.

“Hey, this one has my name on it!”

I hold out my hand, and she places the other box on my palm. I hold it aloft for Sirena to see her name etched into the velvet of hers.

“Open them.”

My girls flip the lids and exclaim with joy. Lavender’s first to lift the locket and chain from the hinged case. Sirena’s slower to pull out the emerald surrounded by pink tourmalines on a simple band.

“Marry me. Be my family forever. Let me love you with every breath for the rest of my life.”

Lavender grins and nods as if there’s no question to it at all. I’ll be the only father she ever knows, and the only one she ever needs. Not a day goes by from this moment on where she’ll ever wonder what it’s like to have a dad, because I’ll always be here for her.

Sirena’s teary eyes search mine, but I don’t worry. I know the only thing she’ll find is my certainty and love. She’s it for me. My start, my middle, my end. She’s everything.

“Marry me,” I say again, needing to hear the words from her, even as she nods. “Say you’re certain. That you’ll marry me. Marry me.”

“Oh, Jonah. Yes, I’ll marry you. I’m sure. I love you!”

Best. Christmas. Ever.

WONDERING ABOUT LUMI AND CALLUM?

Here's a peek at the first chapter of their book, *Getting Off His naughty List*, available now!

Hard rock pounds through the club's speakers, placed everywhere to encourage people to stay in motion throughout the night. Dancing people are thirsty people, that's what the bartenders say. Can't argue with the logic. The bar rails are packed all night for every shift I've ever worked. Doesn't matter if it's Friday night or early Tuesday evening. Folks line up three deep, waiting their turn to rehydrate.

Meanwhile, my fellow dancers and I keep bottles of water snapped into discrete holders along the top of our cages. Our job is to keep the crowd hyped up with our dance moves. No, not those types of moves! We're dancers, not strippers. We're in metal boxes suspended shoulder-level above the crowd with platforms below us, roped off to keep guests from knocking into the frames and hurting themselves.

There's no stripping or anything untoward at Loft. That's not to say our moves aren't enticing and an eyeful, but there's nothing happening at my job that I'd be embarrassed for my grandma to know about. Hell, it's because of an actual grandma I got this gig to begin with.

I spot the floofy white cloud of Fitzzy's hair from here. At eighty-something years old, the woman could probably climb into the cage with me and charm the crowd just as well as the rest of us. I give her a wave, excited when she waves back and points to the much younger gentleman attempting to catch her attention. He's got to be at least twenty years younger than her, and even so my bet's on him not being able to keep up with the old gal.

I scan the dance floor, keeping tabs on the crowd below. It may seem as if our job is to titillate and entertain, but the honest truth is, we're the eyes and ears for club security. The reason Loft is considered the safest dance club for young people in Bourbon is because the cage girls are spotters for any trouble that may be brewing.

Thinking of security brings to mind my personal guard dog. He's not on the security team. In fact, he's way farther up the paygrade as a part owner and the architect of the club. Not that most people recognize his role here when they catch sight of the brute skulking in the most shadowy corners here. His name's Callum Vincent, and I guarantee if anyone asked him, he'd say nobody even sees him.

But I do. Every night when I'm dancing, I feel the protective glare of his gaze focused not just on me, but on everyone around me. Most nights, prickles of heat and awareness let me know he's still got eyes on me when I walk home, too. Not that he ever approaches me, much less speaks to me.

"Hey, girl, you got enough water?" One of the cocktail waitresses is below me, and I'm thankful for the excuse to bend forward to respond to her. It's the perfect opportunity to show a hint of cleavage in Callum's direction without being obvious about it. He stands a head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd. I'm comfortable being a little bit daring, knowing I'm only dipping low enough to give him a show and not the whole room.

The rest of the night flies by, my shift filled with upbeat bops and heavy grinds. The DJ even sneaks in a couple remixes of Christmas songs in honor of the holiday in a few weeks. Dancing to *Baby It's Cold Outside* remastered and sped up is wild. I know my skin is shiny with sweat, the glittery makeup we wear to perform long melted away. By the time the last call bell rings, my legs feel like rubber and my low back aches. At twenty-three, I'm starting to believe I'm too old for this, but despite my parents' nagging and the framed diploma gathering dust on my bookshelf at home, I can't imagine doing anything else.

I'm ready to make my way to the door and walk home when the Spidey-sense that alerts me to Callum's eyes on me raises the hairs along my nape. I don't want to make it obvious I'm looking for him, but I'm craving one last look at his rugged, scarred face before I leave for the night. Tomorrow, I'm off, which means forty-eight hours without laying eyes on my secret crush. Not cool.

"Night, Sal. Night, Bruce!" I wave to the bartenders, who are still cleaning up and prepping for tomorrow, before sidling up to Fitzy's side.

"You about ready to head out, Fitzy? Since you sent your poor would-be suitor off with his head hung low, I thought we could wander homeward together." If there's one thing I've learned from living in her building the past months, it's if I want to look out for her, I'd better do a damn thorough job of disguising it. A single hint of trying to protect the bold-as-brass old dame is a surefire ticket to the kind of tongue lashing nobody wants.

"Yeah, yeah, don't rush me, Lumi-babe. Last call is for weenies. I'll take my damn time and be ready when I'm ready." Her words may be feisty, but she's gathering her purse and jacket while slugging back the dregs of her drink as she says them.

"I know, you can party 'til the sun comes up, but I'm wiped out. It's late enough the boys will freak if I try to leave alone, so do me this solid and walk home with me. Besides, if we hustle we might be in time to catch Olive walking Rupert before bed. Some bunny snuggles are exactly what we need to settle us down before bed."

ALSO BY LAYNE DANIELS

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BOURBON, TEXAS BOOKS AT THE LOFT

[Getting Off His Naughty List](#)

[Teased By the Twins](#)

[Snow Thanks](#)

BOOKS IN ORDER OF PUBLICATION

Kringled in Key West

Pi Means Forever: A Man of the Month Book

Vice'd

Poke'd

Prick'd

Getting Off His Naughty List

Room Twenty-Two: The Muse Between Them Club Sin

Lemon Bars & the Lawyer: Sugar & Spice Nights

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CURVES FOR CHRISTMAS 2022 BOOKS

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[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 JJ Grice

[His Fake Holidate](#) by Anne Lange

The Daddy Clause by Josie O'Sullivan

[Owned for Xmas](#) by Imani Jay