

ELLIE DEVINE

SNOW STRUCK

A NOVELETTE



SNOW
STRUCK

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Celebz!

*Where in the world is Ashton Scott? After winning Hollywood's Hottest Hunk of the Year, the actor promptly disappeared. While sources close to the star remain frustratingly closed-lipped about his current whereabouts, **Celebz!** looks back at some of the star's past hot hideouts....*

Chapter 1

There was four feet of snow outside of Ashton Scott's door and beyond that...nothing but quiet and darkness. He was officially snowed in. Which was fine because it meant he was also officially, completely, truly alone.

No ex-wife calling him for favors; no invasive fans going through his garbage; no agent showing up unexpectedly raving about the latest, greatest script; and, most important of all, no fucking paparazzi.

Ash had escaped Hollywood for this remote, rustic cabin in the Cascades because he couldn't even hear himself think anymore. This cabin was so off-the-grid, he had mild concerns the world would think he died. Maybe he would let them. At thirty-two and after twenty years in show business, he'd finally begun to see the shadows beyond the limelight. He wasn't a teenage heartthrob anymore, but a man whose heart throbbed every time he had another shallow relationship. His parents had been married for forty-five years and were seemingly only more in love. That was what he wanted. Something real. But he was pretty sure reality was mutually exclusive to all the fictions he portrayed on screen.

Casting one last look out at the winter wonderland, he actually smiled before closing the door. He padded back toward the crackling fireplace and the single wingback chair where he'd left a thriller and glass of wine. It really was the simple things in life that made him happy. Like this refuge. Even though it was barely more than a hunting cabin; a single large room with a lofted bed, a tiny kitchenette, and a claw foot tub all crammed in together. The bathroom also seemed like more of an afterthought; a small square room that had been tacked on after everything else was built.

His ex-wife would have been horrified. She refused to stay anywhere that didn't have a five-star rating. Ash sat back down and looked out the large, floor to ceiling windows

framing the fireplace, watching as the night sky began to poke its way through the storm clouds. These were the only stars he needed.

He was just getting to the gruesome part of the book when there was a knock at the door. He froze, his primed imagination flashing to murderous hermits and scorned ex-lovers. He may not mind the world *thinking* he was dead, but he didn't have any actual desire to method-act that part.

Peering around the side of the chair, he stared at the door. Maybe he had imagined it. Maybe it had been the wind.

The banging started up again and this time it was accompanied by a voice. A *feminine* voice.

"I know you're in there, Scott!"

Well, shit. Being called by your last name was never a friendly sign. He stood up slowly, looking around for a weapon. Despite the fact he paid for the best trainer in Hollywood and had done enough of his own stunts to handle himself in a fight, he wasn't egotistical enough to think his muscles would hold up against a bullet or a knife...scorned ex-lovers usually preferred knives, didn't they? Because severing ties required severing arteries?

He picked up the fireplace poker and went to the door, trying to place the vaguely familiar voice, which was still demanding to be let in.

He took a deep breath and swung open the door, bringing up his makeshift weapon defensively.

"Woah!" The woman threw up her hands. "What's with the poker?"

Upon seeing who it was, fury flashed white hot through Ash's entire body. His fingers clenched around his weapon and his eyes narrowed.

"You," he gritted out. "How the fuck did you find me?"

Curly black hair, big, dark eyes, a pouty mouth that was currently scowling, and a short, curvy body that always managed to work its way through the cracks of any security.

Alaina Ruiz-Ortega. The perpetual thorn in Ash's side, the paparazzo that never quit, and the woman who had ended his marriage by splashing proof of his ex-wife's infidelity all over the tabloids.

"Revealing how I found you seems like it will only increase the chances of you murdering me. Would you please drop the weapon?"

"No," he bit out. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Do you really need me to answer that?"

No, he didn't. "To take pictures of me."

She tapped the side of her nose rudely and he noticed her gloves were crusted over with ice.

"Got it in one you clever boy. The reason I'm on your doorstep, however, is because I'm stranded. My stupid car is stuck because there's four freaking feet of snow on the road and I can't call for a tow because there's no goddamn service." She glared at him. "So, can I please come in?"

He slowly lowered the fireplace poker. She was bundled up from head to toe but even through all those layers he could see her shivering. He looked back at her familiar face. The same face that frequently haunted his dreams...and his trips to therapy.

"No," he said and slammed the door shut.

She immediately started banging on it again.

"Come on, Scott! I'll die out here if you don't let me in. There's not another cabin for miles! You may be a pompous Hollywood asshole but surely even you wouldn't let a woman die on your doorstep!"

Ash leaned his head against the door and groaned. She was probably right. Not about the asshole bit but probably about the not letting a woman die. He banged his head against the wood, and she tapped back.

"I'll give you the pictures I took of you through the windows."

He stilled, rough wood pressing into his forehead.. She'd already taken pictures? Maybe he really would kill her. There were lots of places to hide a body in these woods.

“Come on, Scott, those pictures of you in the bathtub were going to make me thousands of dollars! Surely that's worth a single night?”

There went that familiar sizzle of rage.

Ash threw the door back open and held out his hand.

“Give me the camera.”

“Let me inside first,” she demanded, her eyes shooting off sparks despite the fact her lips were turning blue.

He held her gaze for a long moment, dislike seething between them like an acid river. As much as he didn't want to let this virago into his sanctuary it was clear he didn't have a choice.

He took an abrupt step back and gestured into the cabin with the poker.

“Fine. Come in.”

“Can you put down the weapon first?” she asked.

He let out a small growl as he flung it to the floor.
“Happy?”

“Not even remotely but I'll take it.” She walked into the room, tracking in snow and dirt and immediately made for the fireplace. “Thank Christ,” he heard her murmur as she peeled off her wet gloves and put her hands as close to the flames as she could without setting herself on fire.

Ash slowly closed the door behind her, scowling as he looked out at all that expansive, impressive dark.

So much for being alone.



Despite her freezing exterior, Lainy was burning up inside. She didn't want to be here anymore than Ashton Scott, Hollywood's perpetual darling, wanted her here.

She wondered how he would react when he found out she had lied. Lainy might have been a little...slick (some might have said slimy) but she wasn't totally rotten. She would never sell naked pictures of someone, even someone that had appeared naked in no less than three films. There were some lines you just didn't cross. Which was why when she'd seen him stripped down and soaking up some quality bubble time, she'd given her trigger finger a rest.

She'd still snuck a peek...okay a few peeks—she wasn't *dead* and the man might have been an ass but he was a glorious one. A perfectly shaped peach really. And it had been cold on that mountainside. Seeing the flawlessly sculpted Ashton sip wine and read a novel in a bubble bath, with his dark auburn hair damp around his face and a pair of round glasses perched on his long, straight-edged nose, had served as the perfect bit of steam to warm her back up.

Sometimes life just wasn't fair. It wasn't fair someone could look so good and be the bane of her existence, it wasn't fair she'd been forced to leave photography school and get a job to help pay her Tía's medical bills, and it wasn't fair the only work a college drop-out could get that actually paid those bills required her to become something the vast majority of the world scorned.

She toed off her wet boots and kicked them aside, moaning as her heels met warm wooden floors and her toes began to thaw. Life wasn't fair but at least she wasn't going to die in a snowbank and that was enough to get her to the next moment.

“Make yourself at home,” said Ashton dryly as he joined her by the fire, his arms crossed and his shoulders tense. Lainy glanced at him and then, because there was some small...okay large...part of her that enjoyed annoying this man, she leaned back and swiped his wine glass off the table beside the armchair.

“Don’t mind if I do,” she said brightly, meeting his eyes as she took a sip. His icy blue eyes glared balefully back at her. They really were stunning up close, like fire lit sapphires or crystal-clear mountain lakes. Whatever ridiculously romantic imagery you compared them too, it was obvious why they had launched a thousand ad campaigns. Eyes like that were money in the bank. Sometimes they were even money in *her* bank. One of the best paydays she’d ever had was when she’d captured him smoldering full force into the camera while stretched out in a hot tub in Vegas, the night after his marriage to his two-faced wife.

“I think I would have rather it been a serial killer,” he muttered.

“The night is young, there’s still plenty of time for one of us to snap,” she replied cheerfully, knowing he hadn’t been talking to her but enjoying the way his square jaw clenched and a muscle twitched near his eye. “I don’t suppose you have any of that steak you ate for dinner left?”

“Are you actually *trying* to be murdered? I have a lot of money. I could flee anywhere in the world.”

Lainy gave a little snort of amusement and sent him a disgusted side-eye.

“All that money and *this* is the place you choose for your forays into hermitude.”

“I wanted to be *alone*,” he hissed.

“And you couldn’t have been *alone* on a tropical island? What do you have against the sun, Scott?!” Her eyes slid to his hair, the deep red-brown picking up the flickering light from the fireplace so that he was practically glowing. “Never mind, I forgot for a moment I was talking to a ginger. You’re basically as close to a vampire as someone can get without actually dying.”

“If anyone here is a bloodsucking leech, I think we both know that designation falls squarely on you.”

“Oh, burn,” said Lainy flatly. It didn’t matter that comments like that still stung. Ashton Scott didn’t know

anything about her. Therefore, he couldn't judge her, not really. At least that's what she told herself as she continued to pull off her wet layers, her coat and hat joining her boots on the floor. She paused for a moment, contemplating her wet jeans and then shrugged and pulled those off too until she was standing in nothing but a pair of blue long johns and her oversized, grey L.A. Angels sweatshirt.

"You're getting awfully comfortable for a woman living on borrowed time," said Ashton, who had watched her promptly strip-aggravate in silence.

"If it's borrowed, all the more reason to be comfortable. No reason to die cold and wet." She finished by peeling off her wool socks and adding them to the pile. "And you can quit with the threats. I've been following you for three years. You've never even kicked a puppy. I think murder is beyond you."

"I wouldn't be so sure. I actually like puppies."

She huffed out another laugh. "You're funny. That's unexpected."

"You have a sense of humor. I didn't think soulless hell-spawn could laugh. That's unexpected."

She rolled her eyes and turned, letting the heat of the fire roll up her back. She sipped wine and contemplated him over the edge of the glass.

"So, about that steak?" she probed again. She knew she was making herself out to be an obnoxious intruder, but he already thought the worst of her, and she really was hungry.

His arms dropped to his sides and he looked up at the ceiling as if praying for patience. "This is unbelievable."

Lainy nodded in agreement. "It's definitely one of the weirder things that's happened to me. You know what's not weird? Steak."

He gestured brusquely in the direction of the small kitchenette tucked beneath the loft and that was really all the invitation she needed. She shuffled over to the fridge and he followed closely after her, as if he didn't trust her not to poke

through his vegetables and sell an itemized list to the tabloids...which wasn't a bad idea. She could see the headline now: "Find Out What Ashton Scott Eats to Keep Fit! Exclusive Insider Details!"

She shook her head to clear it, hating the way her brain had been reprogrammed.

As if he could read her terrible thoughts, Ashton came back to addressing the elephant in the room. "Where's the camera, Ortega?"

"In my car, Scott. Don't worry, I'll hand it over as soon as they clear the road."

"That could be days!" he said, clearly outraged.

Lainy's stomach clenched and her grip on the metal fridge handle went so tight it was painful. God, she hoped it wasn't days. She didn't think she could endure that much vitriol. Already the cold glare of Ashton's stupid, beautiful eyes felt like an ice burn on her skin. Plus, her family would be worried and between her Tía's radiation therapy and her three school-aged cousins, they had enough to worry about.

She took a deep breath, deliberately relaxed her muscles, and shoved down her anxiety, forcing her brain away from thoughts of how fragile her aunt had become in the past few months, like one more worry might actually cause her to break. Her family knew the kind of work she did, they knew she occasionally disappeared for a few days trying to get the pictures she needed. It would be fine. She pulled his leftover steak out of the fridge and put it on a plate to throw in the world's tiniest microwave, part of her delighting as he watched in horror. She set the timer and then turned to face him.

"Look, it's not like I'm happy about any of this either," she said, striving to sound cool and indifferent.

"I find that hard to believe," he snapped. "In fact, this seems like the perfect ploy for you to get in here and take even more invasive pictures."

Well, that was just ridiculous. She threw out her arms. "Do you see a camera on me anywhere?"

“It could still be in your coat.”

“Go check!”

“Or inside that hideously large sweater.”

Snarling, Lainy drew the sweater over her head and chucked it at him, revealing the formfitting matching blue top of her long johns.

“There! See! No cameras!”

He looked her up and down and his cheeks went pink. “I don’t know why you’re acting like I’m unreasonable for being suspicious.” he said tightly. “You’ve literally followed me all over the world for the past three years. You took pictures of me on my honeymoon!”

“It was my job! And she was a shitty wife!” she said loudly.

“She might have been a shitty wife, but you have a shitty job! Did it ever occur to you that I’m a person?” He said it like she, Lainy, wasn’t, like she was nothing but a bloodsucking leech. It was too much—she snapped.

“I know it’s a shitty job! But I’m a person too! And unlike you, I can’t make millions of dollars just for batting my eyes. I have bills to pay. People to take care of. I’m not going to apologize for inconveniencing you while I’m just trying to survive. You *knew* what it meant to be famous. You made a choice. So suck it up, buttercup. Life isn’t fair. Go cry into your money and get over it!” By the time she was finished, she was breathing hard, her face was flushed, and the microwave was beeping insistently behind her.

So much for cool and indifferent.

For a long moment they simply stood and glared at each other. It was Ashton who broke first.

“Will you please get that food out of the microwave, for God’s sake. As if ruining perfectly cooked steak wasn’t enough.” He tossed her sweater back at her. “And put this back on. You made your point.”

He turned toward the fire and for a moment she thought he was actually going to go check her coat for cameras but all he did was go and pick up the glass of wine she'd abandoned. He drained it and then shook his head wearily. "You can stay."

Chapter 2

There was something incredibly surreal about having Alaina sitting inside his cabin and eating his now over-cooked leftovers. Like having the villain of a storybook shaken off the pages and dumped in his lap. He felt like he already knew her, her motivations (money), her passions (annoying him), even her wardrobe (she had an absurd number of Angels' shirts). It was strange to think she might actually have a backstory, even stranger to imagine it a sympathetic one.

After he refilled his wineglass, he found himself drifting over to the small table where she was eating and sitting down. She ignored him which really only added to the surrealism. Had they ever been in a situation where she was the one going about her life, and he was the one watching her?

“You’re staring,” she said through a mouthful of steak.

“Seems only fair. You’ve been staring at me for the past three years.”

She swallowed and smiled faintly. “I wasn’t staring, I was watching. There’s a difference.”

“Oh? And what is the difference?”

“Intent. You’re just being weird. I was trying to get a picture.”

He almost smiled at her logic. She was clever. Which wasn’t necessarily a surprise since anyone who managed to sneak into dozens of high security private events clearly possessed some intelligence, but it still felt like another small revelation. “What makes you think I don’t have some sort of intention?”

She paused her chewing. “Murder?” she asked speculatively.

“You’re really fixating on the murder thing.”

She shrugged and resumed eating. "It's a female thing. This is exactly the kind of situation we're told to avoid."

"You don't seem very worried."

"Like I said, you don't strike me as the murdering type but even if you are, my choices are death by freezing or death by one of Hollywood's hottest. At least the second option is interesting." She looked him over again, twirling the steak knife idly between her fingers. "And at least I'd have a chance against you. You can't fight Mother Nature."

Against his better judgment, Ash smiled. "A very practical approach to death."

"I told you, life isn't fair. Why would death be any different?" She reached over and snagged his wine glass, raising it toward him in a silent toast and taking a gulp before he could protest. He scowled at her.

"You could ask."

"You could offer," she shot back.

"Why do you do a job you don't like?" he asked abruptly and watched the smirk fall off her face.

"What?" she asked warily, her fork and knife stilling over her plate.

"You said you know your job is shitty. So why do you do it? You're clearly smart, you could do something else."

"Gee, thanks," she said, rolling her eyes and savagely spearing the last bite of meat on her fork. "Because the only thing you need in order to get a job is some brains."

"Isn't it?"

"Spoken like a man who hasn't applied for a job in twenty years." She popped the last bite of food in her mouth then leaned back with his wine and stared him down. "I do a shitty job because people look at me and don't think I'm capable of anything else."

"You said you had people to take care of. What people? Like kids? A husband?" He looked at her hand,

searching for a wedding ring but her fingers were bare. She curled them into her sweater's overlong sleeves and scowled.

"Why are you asking me this?"

"I'm just trying to understand," he said as he looked at her, *really* looked at her, realizing she was right. He hadn't been thinking of her as a person. She'd simply been a nuisance to be avoided. But now he could see the details. The dark circles under her eyes that spoke of sleepless nights, the way the cuffs on her sweater were frayed as if it had been worn constantly for years. He also noticed the way all her nails were chewed down, the old blue nail polish chipped, and wondered if she bit them when she was worried or nervous. It had been a long time since he'd seen a woman with nails that weren't perfectly manicured.

"You're staring again," she said stiffly, and he blinked, trying to shake off this new, suddenly acute awareness of her. "Look, in the end it doesn't really matter why I do what I do, does it? I can't stop and I'm good at it, one of the best, which means as long as you're one of Hollywood's favorite peaches, I'm going to be on that ass until either you disappear for real or I die chasing after you." She smiled a little and swirled the last sip of wine in the glass. "Which is definitely a possibility. Aside from tonight, I almost died getting that honeymoon shot too. I was hanging over the side of a balcony and almost lost my grip."

Surely that wasn't a whisper of concern making his shoulders suddenly tense? Were pictures of him really worth dying for? He shook his head.

"I'm not a monster, Ortega, I've never wanted you dead."

Her smile widened into a grin and his stomach jumped. She was actually quite pretty when she smiled. Her lips had warmed back to a deep rosy color and as they parted, he noticed a gap between her two front teeth that almost made her look sweet and wholesome.

"Just misplaced?" she teased. "Like to the surface of the sun?"

“Maybe,” he hedged.

“It’s okay, Scott, that’s a mild insult to what’s usually hurled at me. Sometimes people throw actual things. One time, Darren Lane threw a *wine bottle* when he realized I’d snapped a pic of him with his mistress.” She drained the last of the wine and stared at the glass regretfully. “What a fuckin’ waste.”

“Darren Lane is an ass,” said Ash absently, his mind still puzzling over why someone would sign up for a job everyone else treated them like shit for doing. “Do you want more wine?”

He realized he might have forgotten who he was talking to when Alaina threw her head back and laughed.

Shit. “Please don’t tell anyone what I said about Darren.” He added. The man might have been an ass, but they ran in the same circles and had worked on more than one set together. Ash didn’t need his careless words getting back to the other man through some gossip rag.

Still smiling broadly, Alaina pushed the wineglass across the table with her finger. “Because you offered, I promise to keep that our little secret.”



Ashton Scott was treating her like a human being.

Which, Lainy realized, was a pretty low bar for her standards to have reached. After he’d refilled his glass of wine and poured another for her, she had started talking and he had actually listened.

To fill the silence, she told some of her wilder pap stories while he sipped his wine. Slowly, his shoulders relaxed, and a spark of interest replaced some of the wariness in his eyes. During one particularly wild story about a drunk Mason Stutter almost clipping Lainy with his car, Ashton snorted.

She tilted her head curiously, “What?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Are you disappointed he missed?” she joked.

“No, it’s just—” he cut himself off and the wariness was back. Lainy almost sighed. This was one of the reasons she had so few friends. No one liked talking to paparazzi, even other paps tended to be closed-lipped for fear that someone else would scoop their story. It was a lonely sort of life and while Lainy was used to it, she had no desire to spend the next however-many days exchanging stilted, one-sided conversations. Which was why she smiled and tried her best to look honest and trustworthy.

“Look, Scott, I’m off the clock which means anything you say is off the record.”

He eyed her skeptically. “And why would I trust you?”

She put a hand over her heart and her smile stretched into a grin. “I could give you my word as a Spaniard.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he delivered the next line flawlessly. “No good, I’ve known too many Spaniards.”

Lainy’s grin faded. “I swear on the soul of my mother, Gabriella Ortega, nothing you say to me within these walls will reach the tabloids,” she said softly.

He looked at her for a long moment and then nodded slowly.

“Okay.”

And for the next little while, it was okay. Lainy would share a pap story and he would counter with stories of his own about that particular celebrity. He had been around Hollywood long enough to have worked with most of them and heard stories about the others.

“You’re different than I thought you would be,” said Ashton quietly, breaking the silence into which they had lapsed. The fire had burned down so that the shadows stretched toward them with cold fingers. Lainy shivered.

“What? Fewer fangs? No noticeable horns?” she asked lightly, rolling the stem of her wineglass between her fingers and watching the red liquid catch the last few licks of flame.

“That was certainly a surprise but that’s not what I meant,” he hesitated, and she nodded in understanding.

“Yeah, you’re different than I expected too.”

“More handsome? More charming?”

Lainy laughed. She had laughed a lot once he started opening up. That was one of the things she hadn’t expected, for Ashton Scott to actually be funny or that his sense of humor veered toward biting. In interviews he always came off as more of the sweet, affable bro.

“You’re definitely stunning up close but I have an excellent camera, so I already knew that. And considering you slammed a door in my face earlier, I don’t think it’s that you’re more charming.” She shrugged. “Like you said, just different.”

“You think I’m stunning?” he asked, his ridiculously blue eyes glinting with amusement.

“There’s that ego I *was* expecting. You know you’re stunning. The whole *world* knows you’re stunning. Someone somewhere probably has a shrine dedicated to your beauty in their house complete with clippings of your hair and old pieces of gum you’ve spit out.”

He nodded somberly. “Karen Saladaris. She lives in Cheyenne, Wyoming. She’s sent pictures. I have a restraining order.”

Lainy made a face. “Well that’s genuinely frightening but see? Me taking pictures of you hardly signifies next to something like that.”

“You took naked pictures of me. That signifies.” The words were pointed and Lainy flinched, wondering if she should tell him the truth. She didn’t *think* he would toss her into the cold if he suddenly found out she had lied...but she wasn’t positive. He might be different than she expected but he was still a celebrity and might as well have been an alien for all they had in common. She decided to give him some of

the truth, if for no other reason than she intended to sleep tonight, and a guilty conscience would gnaw at her.

“You may be naked but you’re also covered in bubbles. For a man that’s starred in three superhero movies, you like a very lavish bath, Scott.”

“And what about when I was getting into or getting out of the bath, Ortega? What about *those* pictures which I’m assuming you took?”

He had actually already been in the bath when Lainy managed to find the cabin and climb high enough into a tree to get a good view, but she remembered the moment he stood up to get out in exquisite detail. There had been bubbles on his shoulders, water caught in the hair on his chest, and rivulets that carved down through the lines of his sharply defined abs. He’d looked like a sea god emerging from the foam. Lainy had also seen just what exactly Ashton Scott was packing below the waist and now understood how he moved through the world with such confidence. The man didn’t just look like a god; he was hung like one too. She eyed him now, in his dark jeans and white Henley and realized it had been a very, very, *very* long time since she’d had an opportunity to worship any godly appendages.

He snapped his fingers in front of her face and she started.

“What?” she said stupidly.

“Now you’re the one staring.”

“I was thinking.”

“I didn’t realize the question I’d asked was so difficult.”

“I don’t have pictures of your dick on my camera, okay?” she snapped. “I may be an asshole but I’m not a hemorrhoid on top of an asshole.”

Ashton made a face of disgust and if she hadn’t been so annoyed, Lainy might have smiled at his delicate sensibilities.

“So you lied,” he said flatly, and she pushed away from the table and stood up, wrapping her arms around herself defensively.

“I was cold, hungry, and trapped. I needed leverage.”

He stood up from the table too and crossed his arms. “How do I know you’re not lying again right now?”

For a brief moment, she wondered how they had gotten back to this, for a little while they’d actually been getting along. Her eyes caught on the two empty wine glasses and she bit back another sigh. That was the problem. They’d run out of booze.

“I guess you’ll know for sure when I hand over the memory card for my camera.” Even though just the thought made a black hole of despair open up inside her. She couldn’t even contemplate the amount of money she would be losing. She would have to find some other way to make it up but that was a problem for Future Lainy. Present Lainy had her own issues.

“I’m going to sleep,” she said, too tired to fight anymore. Whatever alcoholic miracle they’d been sipping had clearly run dry and she just didn’t have it in her to go another round. “I don’t suppose you have a blanket you’re willing to spare.”

“Where exactly were you planning to sleep?”

“On the floor, where else? This place is the size of a postage stamp.”

“You’ll freeze.”

“Do you have any other suggestions?”

“You could... We could share the bed,” he said, looking so unhappy at the prospect it was a small wonder he’d managed to force the words out in the first place.

“Don’t hurt yourself, Scott. I’m sure I’ll survive on the floor. Who knows, maybe I’ll crawl *under* the bed since that’s where monsters belong.”

“Ortega,” he said, clearly frustrated but she held up a hand and cut him off.

“It’s fine. Can I please just have a blanket?”

His mouth snapped shut and he went and climbed the steep, narrow stairs that led up to the loft and reappeared a minute later with two blankets and a pillow.

“Here.”

“Thanks.” She took the bundle and moved over to the dying fire, laying out a passable little camp bed. When she finally settled in, an old quilt tucked around her legs, she looked up and found Ashton watching her.

“I don’t think you’re a monster,” he said quietly and Lainy’s heart beat a little faster. It wasn’t a compliment and it certainly wasn’t an apology, but it was something.

“It’s fine,” she said again, and she supposed it was, because in the end it didn’t really matter. They would both go back to their respective realities eventually and it would be like this strange little interlude had never happened. He looked like he might be about to say more so she swiftly lay down and turned away.

“Goodnight, Scott.”

Chapter 3

Ash couldn't sleep. He kept thinking about Alaina's face when he'd accused her of lying. She'd actually looked... hurt. Which was unfair. They both knew he had no reason to trust her. But then he remembered the way she had placed her hand over her heart and quoted *Princess Bride* at him, swearing on the soul of her dead mother to keep whatever was said between them in confidence. He had believed her.

He couldn't actually remember the last time he'd seen anyone speak with such sincerity or conviction, which only felt like further proof that he needed to get the hell out of Hollywood. Alaina might have lied about the pictures, but she clearly also never bothered with pretenses. In a matter of hours, she had become more real to him than any of the women he'd spoken with in years and suddenly he felt starved for that kind of authenticity, the need like a gnawing ache in his chest.

He rolled over, punching at his pillow and trying to drown out the chorus of questions demanding he learn more about her. He rolled over again and this time the chorus did stop, not because he finally managed to fall asleep but because he heard something even louder: the sound of teeth chattering.

He sat up and looked out over the short railing. The fire was nothing more than coals and the air had taken on a definite chill. The little generator that provided electricity to the cabin practically powered down at night, working just hard enough to keep the pipes from freezing. If he squinted, Ash could make out Alaina's huddled form in the light of the full moon, her body curled up beneath one of her two blankets. Maybe he *was* an asshole. A gentleman would have given her the down blanket currently keeping his own body toasty warm.

He swore quietly. There was no reason for her to sleep on the floor or for either of them to freeze. The loft stretched the entire width of the cabin and had a king-sized mattress. They could be in the bed and not even touch. Before he could talk himself out of it, Ash slipped out from beneath the covers,

wincing at his bare feet met cold wood. He moved quietly down the stairs to Alaina's side and only hesitated a moment before gripping her shoulder and shaking gently.

It was the first time he'd ever touched her.

"Ortega, wake up. I can't sleep listening to your teeth chatter."

When there was no response, he shook a little harder.

"Alaina, come on, don't make me feel like an even bigger bastard."

Slowly, the blanket pulled down just far enough for him to see her eyes glaring up at him.

"You're waking me up because my shivering is bothering *you*, Scott? Would you like me to freeze more quietly?"

He winced, yeah, she definitely thought he was an asshole. "No, that's not it. I'm waking you up because you're clearly uncomfortable and there's more than enough room for both of us in the bed."

She looked at him suspiciously. "This feels like a trap."

"It's not a trap. Stop being stubborn. You're cold, the bed is warm, and we're both adults. Unless you have a boyfriend or something you think will have an issue with you sharing a bed with one of Hollywood's Hottest Hunks." He gave her his most charming grin and was oddly relieved to see her pull the blanket down a little farther and give him a begrudging smile back. She sat up and shook her head.

"I don't have a boyfriend. How can I date when I'm always chasing after you?"

Again, there was an odd flare of relief that Ash covered by raising an eyebrow and giving her the look his agent called "rakish."

"Well, if you like, you can chase me up the stairs too."

Of course with Alaina there wasn't even the hint of a swoon. Instead, she rolled her eyes and stood, bringing the

blanket with her and wrapping it around her head and body like the world's fluffiest armor.

"In your dreams, Scott," she said tartly and pushed past him, the blanket trailing after her like a train as she climbed the stairs.

His feet now freezing, Ash was practically on top of her as she dropped the blanket and climbed into the bed. He was ready to dive in after her but then she pulled the comforter up to her chin, closed her eyes, and moaned. His body's reaction was instantaneous, like someone had tied him up in a silken rope and *pulled*, leaving him immobilized.

"This feels so fucking good," she said, the words low and breathy and Ash had never heard anything so indecent in his life. Before he even knew what was happening, his cock was hardening.

"I may never leave this bed, Scott."

"Ash," he said abruptly, the word rough and strained. Her eyes opened and she stopped wiggling.

"What?"

He cleared his throat. "We're going to be sharing a bed, it seems silly for you to call me by my last name," he paused and then added, very deliberately, "Alaina."

"It's just Lainy," she said, her voice back to being low and soft and making him extremely glad it was dark, and he was wearing sweatpants.

"Well, Lainy, if you wouldn't mind moving over, I would like to be able to feel my feet again."

"Oh! Sorry!" She moved over quickly. and he took a breath to steel himself before sliding in beside her. She was right, the warmth was heavenly and if he hadn't been so aware of the woman beside him, he might have been tempted to moan as well. But rather than relaxing into it, his entire body tensed up. Despite having been almost constantly within each other's orbits for years, this was the first time he had ever been close enough to feel the heat coming off Lainy's body. He could also smell the sweet, coconut-lime of her shampoo,

because of course the woman who had criticized his cabin in the snow would smell like a goddamn ray of tropical sunshine. He felt her shift beside him, her hand brushing accidentally against his arm and his foolish cock jumped.

Maybe *he* should go sleep on the ice-cold floor.

“Ash,” her voice was a questioning whisper in the dark. It was the first time she had ever said his name. “Are you okay?”

“Of course. Why?”

“You got tense all of a sudden.”

“How could you possibly know if I’m tense or not?” he asked while deliberately trying to relax.

It was darker up here, away from the big windows and the moon, so he couldn’t see her, but he could *hear* her smirking. “Watching you, learning you, has been my whole job. Trust me, even in the dark I know your body.”

He knew she wasn’t trying to be provocative but somehow everything she was saying had taken on a dirty edge. He wondered what else she knew, worried she might actually be able to read his body like a book with this sudden desire detailed across the pages. It had been more months than he cared to think about since he had been this close to a woman in the dark. That had to be the reason for his body’s response. It couldn’t really be about Lainy and her pretty blush mouth with its gapped front teeth or the lush curves she’d revealed when she’d stripped off her sweatshirt. He stared toward the dark ceiling, afraid of what he might imagine if he closed his eyes.

“Maybe I’m tense because you know so much about me, but I know practically nothing about you.” He strove for some levity, “You’re sharing a bed with a celebrity that’s given heartfelt interviews to magazines, I’m sharing a bed with a stranger.”

She gave one of her amused little snorts and he felt her roll to face him. “From what I know of celebrities, sharing a bed with strangers is a common enough occurrence. I once

photographed Lance Cabrerro come out of the same club with a different woman every night for a week straight.”

“Well I’m not Lance Cabrerro,” he said stiffly. Lance was a bastard, and the comparison was enough to cool some of the unexpected need coursing through him.

“Oh, everyone who’s ever watched an award show knows that. You beat him every time,” said Lainy lightly and, oddly, it felt like a reassuring endorsement of Ash’s character.

“See, this is exactly what I’m talking about.” He rolled over as well, searching for her face in the dark. “You know all these weird details about my life, and I know nothing about yours.”

“Don’t you think you know enough? At the end of the day, I’m still a pap, still a liar and a leech.”

She said it nonchalantly, but it was like talking in the dark lit up every verbal nuance. He could barely see her, but he could hear every hitch in her breath, and he had been right. She had been hurt earlier.

“I’m sorry, Lainy.” He hesitated, wishing he could see her face. “I was a dick earlier. You were right, I’ve never really thought of you as a person and that’s shitty.” She shifted again and her fingers whispered against his like a gentle reproof. “Maybe while we’re stuck out here, we can ignore reality?” He reached out, chasing after those fingers, and found her hand, the touch deliberate this time. “Can we start over? Please?”

In the back of his mind, a different voice told Ash that this might be a mistake. Ignoring reality didn’t change that they would have to go back to it eventually, but the words felt right coming out of his mouth and they took some of his tension with them. She was quiet for a moment but then he felt her fingers curl around his and squeeze.

“Okay. What do you want to know?”



Lainy was fairly certain she had stumbled into the Twilight Zone. She was not only sharing a bed with Ashton Scott—*Ashton Freaking Scott!*—he was apologizing for hurting her feelings and earnestly asking to know more about her.

She tried to keep her breathing calm as she waited for him to ask her a question, reminding herself over and over that none of this really meant anything. It didn't matter that she now knew he smelled like wood smoke and tea tree oil or how hot and hard his biceps were. It didn't matter that every time he said her name in that low, rough voice she felt a thrill that arrowed straight down to her core. It didn't matter because even though he was suggesting they ignore reality for a while, she knew it would still be there, waiting to bite her hard on the ass.

“Tell me about *Princess Bride*,” he said finally and Lainy was so startled, she laughed.

“What?”

“Are you really a Spaniard? Or do you just love the movie?”

She contemplated just telling him that she loved the movie but another part of her, maybe the lonely part, pushed her to give him the truth.

“I do love the movie but yes, I'm half a Spaniard, or three quarters? My father is from there. My grandfather too. He met my grandmother in France during World War II. He was a refugee from Spain, she was a nurse. It was love at first sight and all very romantic. Then my mother met my father when she was in Spain visiting family the summer after she graduated from college.” She frowned, realizing her mother had been a little younger than Lainy was now. Maybe that was why her mom had fallen in love so quickly and so blindly with Lainy's father—youth and the naïve optimism Lainy herself had never been allowed.

“You meant it when you swore to your mother,” said Ash quietly, almost gently. It wasn’t a question and she doubted he could even really see her in the dark, but she nodded anyway, her chest going tight as it always did when she thought of her mother.

“She died in a car accident when I was fifteen.” In a few months it would have been ten years but Lainy’s heart still felt like it hadn’t finished breaking.

“I’m so sorry, Lainy. That’s awful,” Ash’s voice was solemn and sincere and for a moment, she could barely breathe. A lump formed in her throat and heat pressed at the back of her eyes. She closed them tightly, sucked in a breath, and pushed it all down. She couldn’t get stuck in past sorrows; she was too busy fending off present ones. Losing her mother only made her more determined not to lose her aunt. Whatever it took to ensure her Tía had the best medical care on the planet, Lainy would fucking do it.

“I told you, death isn’t fair. We just have to keep focusing on what’s ahead of us.”

She thought he might press for more, ask her again who she was taking care of or about her dad, who had stopped contacting Lainy as soon as her mother died, but Ash surprised her again by completely changing track.

“And what’s ahead for Alaina Ruiz-Ortega?”

The real answer was just more of the same old shit that was behind her: Taking pictures, bills, helping with her younger cousins, more bills, doing shifts down at the family’s struggling restaurant, hope for a few hours of sleep, rinse, repeat. It was a bleak picture, which was why Lainy usually stuck with a shorter focus lens, the next minute, the next hour. That was all she could give herself, so that’s all she was going to give the man beside her.

“Sleeping in a big, warm bed, maybe forever or at least until the snow melts.”

“Come on, that’s it?” he pushed, as if he really wanted to hear about her lack-luster plans for the future.

“You come on! I just told you about my tragically dead mom. That’s some next level shit. The most personal thing I know about you is that you had your first kiss on a Ferris wheel. Which, by the way, is super cliché.”

“You read that interview?” he asked, and for some reason Lainy felt her cheeks heat. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she also had some weird, creepy shrine of him in her bedroom.

“I read all your interviews. You want to be a good pap, you get to know your marks,” she said matter-of-factly and was relieved when he let out a little grunt of annoyance.

“Right, of course.”

“Why don’t you tell me what’s ahead for Ashton Scott? Off the record, of course.” She thought she’d kept her tone light and teasing but he was quiet for so long she worried she’d upset him but then, in a voice that was practically a whisper,

“I think I’m going to stop acting.”

“What!?” She burst out, sitting up and whirling to face him. Cold air rushed beneath the comforter and Ash tried to tug her back down.

“You’re letting out the heat.”

She resisted, still stunned by his quiet revelation. “But you’re Ashton Scott.”

“Lainy, come on, lie back down.”

Giving in to the insistent pressure of his hand, she slowly lay back down. He drew the blanket back over her shoulders and she had the distant realization that they were closer now.

“How can you retire?” She repeated, “You’re Ashton Scott.”

“I’m Ashton Scott,” he agreed, “Which means I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

“But why?” Her brain still wasn’t quite grasping what he was saying. He was one of the most popular actors in Hollywood, why would anyone give that up?

“Because I’m tired. I’m tired of the politics and fake smiles, tired of the false lines people feed you even when you’re not on camera. It’s all just glitter and paste. Nothing in my life feels real anymore.” He sighed deeply and even from a foot away she could feel the last of the tension bleeding out of him. “I was twelve years old when I started doing this and I’ve never had a chance to think about doing anything else, never even bothered to think about if what I was doing actually made me happy.”

“It doesn’t?” she asked and there was another long stretch of silence.

Finally, “No. If it ever did, it doesn’t anymore,” he said firmly, as if it was more than a simple confirmation, as if it were actually a decision.

Lainy let out a sigh of her own. “Well, I guess we’re even. That’s definitely some next level shit.”

He laughed, the sound oddly relieved. “I suppose we are.”

“No longer strangers?” she asked pointedly.

“No longer strangers,” confirmed Ash and even though it was ridiculous, Lainy felt a bubble of joy well up inside her...which promptly popped as she realized that if Ashton Scott was no longer *Ashton Scott*, whatever came next for her wouldn’t include him.

Not even from a distance.

Chapter 4

Ash woke up slowly. His face was cold but the rest of him was delightfully warm. Even better than the warmth was the dream he'd been having, tendrils of it still hovering over his brain like a glimmering morning fog. There'd been a woman, a woman who smelled like a tropical vacation and had a smile like the sun. She'd felt so solid beneath his hands, with the kind of thick, rolling curves that made a man want to hold on and dive deep. He could still feel them, a round ass pressed against his cock, the heavy curve of a breast in his palm. He groaned, trying to sink back into the dream but someone was calling his name.

“Ash! Ashton! Wake up!”

There was a sharp pinch delivered to his hand and Ash's eyes jerked open.

Morning sunlight filtered into the loft from below and at the sight of the messy dark curls in front of him, Ash felt his stomach drop even as his cock got harder.

It hadn't been a dream.

“Fuck!” He jerked away from Alaina, his hand tingling as it left the heat of her body. Had he actually worked it up under her shirt? Christ, if she did decide to murder him, he would deserve it.

“Shit, Lainy, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have, I mean I would never—fuck!” he broke off, mortified and worried he'd traumatized her. She rolled over to face him and he was relieved to see she didn't look angry or scared, but she did look...odd.

“Calm down, Scott. It's obvious you were asleep and I'm pretty sure I was the one who cuddled up to you. Even with this big comforter it got chilly.” She blinked away some of the distance in her eyes and a small, teasing smile slid across her face. “And the entire world knows how hot you are.”

At the sight of her gapped front teeth, the knots in his stomach unraveled but the want, the need, was still humming beneath his skin. She had felt so fucking good beneath his hands. Hot and magnetic. Drawn and unable to stop himself, he reached out and gently brushed a curl off her face.

“So you’re not upset?”

At the touch of his hand, she froze, her eyes big and dark as they met his. She slowly shook her head. “No,” she said softly, “I’m not upset.”

She looked so sweet. Sweet and warm and ruffled, with her hair a little wild and her cheeks still sleep-flushed. This would be how she looked waking up beside a lover and Ash had the sudden overwhelming urge to lean over and play the part.

Maybe she would let him.

He scooted a little closer, his eyes drifting down to her mouth.

“Ash?”

The questioning tone made him pause, she was biting her lip and he saw her glance down at his mouth so that, for a moment, he thought it would be her that closed the distance. But then their eyes met again, hers widened even further and she jolted upright.

“I have to go to the bathroom!”

She was scrambling out of bed before Ash could even really process what had happened. She flashed him a too-bright smile. “Do you mind if I use some toothpaste?”

“Whatever you need,” he said, dazed, watching as she shivered and made for the stairs.

A few seconds later, he heard the door to the bathroom close and sat up, putting his head in his hands. What the hell had he been thinking? If she hadn’t been traumatized already, she probably was now.

Groaning, he slowly followed after her. He built up the fire first, grateful as licks of heat warmed his hands. The cabin

was cold in the morning and the bathroom was the worst. He glanced at the closed door as he walked back to the kitchenette, following the smell of freshly-brewed coffee and worrying as he poured it into two ceramic mugs.

He'd heard the water running but Lainy had been in there an awfully long time.

He sipped his coffee, hoping it would clear away the last lingering remnants of his dreams and maybe even help drown out the stubborn desire still pulsing through his blood. The bathroom door opened, and he turned quickly, gesturing at her coffee cup.

"I didn't know if you took cream or sugar," he said awkwardly, looking up just in time to see Lainy striding toward him with a determined look on her face.

"Shit, I knew you were upset—" She reached for him and he thought she might slap him, but it was her lips pressing against his that cut him off.

For a moment, Ash didn't know what the hell he was supposed to do. He stood frozen as dreams and reality collided but then he felt her fingers curl into his shirt, pulling him closer and the heat and need inside him flared, burning away any trace of doubt.

His hands dropped to her thighs, and he lifted her up until her legs wrapped around his waist. He was suddenly desperate to have her close, desperate to have those glorious curves back where this had started, pressed against his cock. She moaned into his mouth, squeezing her thighs and rubbing her pussy against him while her fingers slid into his hair and her mouth became even more fervent. Christ, she was hot. She wasn't a dream, she was a goddamn fantasy and Ash wanted more, wanted all of her beneath his hands.

He spun them around, bracing her on top of the counter, then both of their hands were moving. Cool fingers slipped beneath his shirt, stroking over his abs while his palm moved back to her breast, his thumb brushing roughly against her nipple and making her gasp. Her mouth on his was wicked and clever, as if this woman could ever be anything else, and

every second he was away from it, as sweaters and shirts were pulled off, felt like a fucking loss.

Their kisses became deeper and more desperate, their bodies even more so with hands grasping and hips grinding until Ash thought he would lose his mind if he didn't get inside her. Her hand slipped beneath the waistband of his sweats and closed around his aching cock and he pulled away from her mouth with a groan.

She licked up the side of his neck and nipped at his ear.

"Fuck me, Ash," she begged and then he really did lose his mind.

He stepped away just long enough to yank down the bottoms of her long johns while she pulled his erection out of his pants and then he was back, their bodies pressing against each other. Her breasts teased his bare chest while he rubbed his himself against her, loving the little, desperate sound she made every time the head of his cock stroked over her clit.

"Fuck, you're already so wet for me, Lainy."

Her fingers tightened in his hair. "I want you inside me. Ash, please."

His name on her lips sounded like a warning. This was already too much, too hot, too good. It would change everything, would turn their previous reality to ash.

Capturing her mouth, he thrust into her, delighting in the way she moaned around his tongue as his cock sank deep. Their kiss was a wildfire, building the heat and need inside him, pushing him to fuck her harder, pull her closer, and stroke her higher until everything was Lainy: round, hot, and minty sweet. Touching her now, he knew, he would happily burn everything for this woman

"You're so tight, so hot Lainy. This pussy is half hell, half heaven, and wholly perfect," he said roughly, kissing his way down her neck and chest until he could draw a nipple into his mouth.

"God, you feel so good," she gasped, her short nails scoring his lower back as she dragged him closer. He pulled

away from her glorious tits and looked down at her. Her back was arched, her curls cascading behind her, her face was flushed and beautiful, her lips parted in pleasure. She was a vision. How could he have ever missed how fucking lovely she was?

He could feel his orgasm building inside him, could feel them both drawing closer to that hard, delicious edge. Her thighs were trembling around him and she was gripping him so tight he thought she might draw blood. It wasn't enough.

He reached out and grabbed the back of her neck, forcing her head back up, forcing her to look at him. She had seen so much of him the past three years; he needed her to see this too, needed her here with him so later he would know it had been real.

“Watch me while I fuck you, lovely girl,” he ordered and felt her body clench around him.

“Ash,” she whimpered as he stroked deep, their eyes locked on each other.

“You're going to come on my cock, Lainy, and then I'm taking you back to bed and I'm going to lick that perfect pussy until you scream my name.” He squeezed the back of her neck, his other hand gripped tightly on her hip as his hips moved against hers.

“Touch yourself for me, Lainy, I want to feel you come,” he commanded, and her hand slipped obediently between their bodies.

It only took a couple of seconds before she cried out and he felt her orgasm pulsing around him. Her eyes closed and Ash leaned down and kissed her, wanting to hold on to this connection for as long as possible. He thrust a few more times before his own release rushed through him and he came hard, emptying into her with a groan.

His body still felt electric and his brain a little cloudy when he finally dropped his head onto her shoulder and tried to catch his breath. She was wrapped around him, their bodies still joined as sanity slowly crept back in.

Ash realized several things all at once: first, he had just had wild, frantic sex with Alaina Ruiz-Ortega, second, they hadn't used a condom, and third and most important, he wanted to do it again.



When Lainy had woken up with Ash's arm around her waist and his erection pressing against her ass, she had thought she might still be dreaming. She had fallen asleep thinking about her life without Ashton Scott in it and realized that at some point over the past three years she *had* become one of those people who were a little obsessed with him. Maybe she wasn't at risk of setting up an Ashton Scott shrine of her own but a future spent trailing some other hyped-up celebrity seemed unbearably bleak. She actually *liked* Ash and last night, she had felt that like and obsession teetering on the dangerous edge of full-blown infatuation.

It was probably safe to say she'd fallen over that cliff and was now lying breathless at the bottom.

She hadn't known how to react when he'd lain beside her and looked like he actually *wanted* to kiss her. Like, while they were both fully awake and conscious. She'd panicked. Then she'd wanted. Then she'd remembered he was leaving Hollywood and lost her five-fingered grip on reality. Kissing him had seemed like a good idea.

She hadn't expected him to react the way he had.

No one had ever fucked her like that, like she was the only source of heat in the middle of a snowstorm. Like they would die if they weren't inside her.

He was still inside her, his forehead pressed into her neck as his breathing slowed.

She felt his back tense beneath her hands and wondered if he was about to pull away and freak out but

instead his hands merely tightened on her ass and he began to kiss his way up her neck.

“Ash?” she asked cautiously and felt him sigh, press a final kiss near her jaw, and pull back just enough so they could look at each other.

“That was unexpected,” he said without preamble and Lainy blushed.

“For you and me both.”

His lips quirked and he raised an eyebrow. “You kissed me first.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t expect—I mean you just...” she trailed off and gave him a helpless look. “I just didn’t expect it to get so hot so quickly.”

His amusement faded. “Yeah, I just realized we forgot a condom. But, just so you know, I get tested regularly and my last results were negative.” He met her eyes and shifted restlessly. “And if you get—I mean if we just made—” He broke off, looking more flustered than she had ever seen him. It was kind of cute. “What I’m trying to say is that I would support whatever choice you wanted to make.”

Aw. She gave him a reassuring smile.

“I appreciate that but I’m on the shot so I’m not too concerned about pregnancy and my last test results were negative too.”

“Good, I’m glad we worked that out,” he said firmly as if they had also made some sort of big decision. This time when he tensed it was because he was lifting her off the counter. She gripped his shoulders at the sudden shift in gravity and gave him a bewildered look.

“What the hell, Scott?”

He gave her a sweet, crooked grin and her heart lurched.

“I made you a promise, Ortega.”

“You did?” she asked, a little breathless as her clit rocked against him as he began climbing the stairs.

“I told you I was going to eat your pussy until you were screaming my name.”

“You don’t want to stop and talk about this? About what just happened?”

He didn’t even pause, just shook his head as he tossed her down on the bed. His gorgeous blue eyes were dark as he looked over her sprawled body.

“No. I told you last night. I came here to escape reality and right now I don’t give a fuck about anything that’s not between your thighs.”

He put a knee on the bed and leaned toward her. The muscles in his abs tightened and the morning sunlight caught at the rusty-colored cowlicks in his hair. He looked delicious and wicked and more tempting than the devil himself. He ran his finger up her leg and pressed gently at her knee.

“Spread them for me, lovely girl,” he coaxed and Lainy realized she was going to give him whatever he wanted even if it left her wrecked.

Chapter 5

Lainy had always assumed that Ashton Scott was terrible in bed. It was the only reason she could think of for why his ex-wife had cheated from essentially day one. But after two and a half days of doing little else besides eating, sleeping, fucking, and taking the occasional (sexy as hell) bubble bath Lainy had come to the conclusion that Ash's ex was actually just one of those people who didn't know a good thing—a *great* thing—when they saw it.

Because Ashton Scott wasn't just amazing in bed, he was pretty great out of it too.

And that was the real problem.

Standing at the bottom of the cabin's gravel driveway, Lainy kicked at a rock that had been knocked off the freshly plowed road. Her time with Ash was up and she wasn't ready. She didn't think she would ever be ready. Her stupid infatuation had spiraled to the point where the thought of leaving now sent an electric jolt of pain zinging through her chest.

Maybe she shouldn't have kissed him, shouldn't have fed into the secret, foolish hopes of her heart, but, unlike Ash, she couldn't quite forget what was waiting for her at the end of this road. Whatever lay ahead for him, whether he kept acting or retired, would be a choice *he* made. Lainy didn't have the bank account for that kind of luxury.

In the real world, her choices were a lot more limited but here, in this dream she'd stumbled into, for just a moment, she'd been able to be a star. She'd been able to choose Ash and, like the perfect actor he was, he'd chosen her back and made her believe it was something more. But she knew it couldn't last. Dreams never did. If Hollywood had taught her anything, it was that women like her didn't end up with the hero of the story and that was the role Ashton Scott had been playing as soon as he turned sixteen

She stared in the direction of the rental car she'd hidden in the trees and another one of those electric pangs shot through her. She took a step back from the road. One more night. She would steal one more night with Ash and in the morning, she would leave before he woke up. It was better that way. He wouldn't have to feel the discomfort of telling her to go and she wouldn't have to endure the pain of hearing it. It wasn't a happy choice, but it was the only one she could afford to make.



Ash was in the middle of cooking dinner when he realized what the odd, light, slightly dizzying feeling in his chest was: happiness. He was actually happy.

There was just something about Lainy, something so bright and unexpected that when he looked at her it was like suddenly realizing he'd spent the past few years gazing at stars thinking they were the sun. Now he knew what sunshine was supposed to feel like and no one else compared. Perhaps that was why, when he heard the door open and the sound of boots stomping off snow, it felt like all the warmth suddenly rushed back into the cabin.

“Hey, I'm glad you're back,” he called, glancing over to see Lainy shedding her layers onto the floor. He grinned. “Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes. Which should be just enough time for you to hang your stuff up by the fire so it dries.”

But rather than shoot off a sassy quip or tell him to stop nannying her, Ash was surprised when he felt her arms slide around him from behind. She buried her face in his back and sighed and the gesture was so sweet and casually intimate, she might as well have reached inside him, plucked out his heart, and put it in her pocket.

“So warm,” he felt her murmur and he put down his knife so he could put his hands over hers, noting they were

indeed icy cold.

“Jesus, Ortega, you need better gloves.”

She sighed again. “I need a lot of things, Scott. Gloves are low on my list of priorities.”

“Oh? And what’s at the top of the list?” he asked casually. Over the past few days, he’d managed to gather a few more pieces to the puzzle that was Lainy Ruiz-Ortega. He now knew her aunt was battling cancer and even though she hadn’t admitted it, he suspected she was the one paying the medical bills. The realization only made him feel like an even bigger asshole and even more determined to help...if she would let him.

But sharing her secrets and asking for help clearly wasn’t what she had in mind. Instead, she bit him on the shoulder and slipped a hand down to the top button of his jeans.

“You,” she said simply and that was all it took for Ash to be hard and ready.

“What about dinner?”

“It can wait. I just want you,” she sounded so earnest that something inside him twisted. He would give her whatever she wanted, *anything*, all she had to do was ask.

“Okay. Go crawl under the comforter and warm up a bit.” He lifted her right hand to his mouth and kissed her palm, loving the way her sigh caught as he slipped two of her fingers into his mouth and sucked. “Get started while I turn off the stove and then I’ll come make sure you finish.” He felt her nod against his back and then she slipped away. He pulled the chicken out of the oven, and left it on top of the stove, knowing it would likely be ruined (like his steak) and not giving a single fuck about it.

Lainy was moaning quietly by the time he began climbing the stairs and he stumbled in his haste to divest himself of his jeans and strip off his shirt. Her hands were no longer cold when he joined her under the covers. He knew because he reached down and pulled up the one she had

stroking between her thighs and again sucked her fingers into his mouth, groaning as he tasted her.

“So sweet, lovely girl.”

It was dim in the loft, but even in the low lighting he could see the way her eyes watched him, big and dark and almost reverent.

“It’s all for you, Ash,” she said, and it felt like a confession, like something real and new and fragile between them. Perhaps that was why when he kissed her it wasn’t with the usual hungry desperation. It was long and deep and slow. He lost track of everything as they kissed, their hands stroking and exploring each other’s bodies like this was the only thing they planned to do for the rest of their lives.

He found a new spot along her hip that made her moan when he sucked it and she took her time exploring his chest and tracing the lines of his abs with her tongue. He was shaking when she finally got to his cock, but she sucked him slowly, leisurely, her tongue running along the base of his shaft before taking the crown between her lips. When she finally swallowed him down, she held his gaze and he thought this was definitely love.

When he couldn’t take it anymore, he buried his hand in her hair and pulled her back up to his mouth, pushing his tongue between her lips and his fingers between her folds to stroke her clit.

“Tell me what you want, lovely girl.” His cock replaced his fingers, stroking against her and she moaned.

“You,” she gasped out. “I just want you, Ash.”

“I’m all yours, love, whatever you want, you can take,” he said, desperation bleeding into the words as she sat up, her hands braced on his chest as she moved back and finally sank onto him. They both moaned.

“Fuck, that’s it, Lainy. You feel so good squeezing my cock.” His hands moved to grip her hips. “Ride me, lovely girl, let me feel you come apart.”

Then they were both moving, and the need and urgency were back. Lainy ground herself against him while he thrust up into all that tight, wet heat, and when he felt her body tense, felt her fingers curling against his chest, he surged up and kissed her, swallowing down her cry as her pussy clenched around him.

He didn't give her any time to recover. He rolled them over, putting all those addictive curves beneath him and then holding her gaze as he pounded into her.

“You look so pretty when you come on my cock, Lainy. You feel so good, so perfect, like you were made for me.” He could feel his orgasm building at the base of his spine, and the only thing he wanted more was to see that look of bliss on her face just one more time. “Give me one more, Lainy love, let me feel you come one more time.”

“Ash, fuck, Ash, I want, I need—” he slipped a hand under her luscious ass and shifted, angling his hips up and then she was screaming his name and squeezing around him. He thrust one more time and exploded, coming so hard that for a moment everything else faded out except for the feel of the woman wrapped around him.

Afterwards, they lay quietly together, Lainy's head resting on his chest while Ash traced patterns over her back. He thought she might have fallen asleep and spared a brief, regretful thought for the chicken freezing on the stovetop. But then she sighed and burrowed against him, her hand curling around the nape of his neck and any hunger pains were eclipsed by the bright, dizzying feeling that was back in his chest, the happiness that was the sole product of the woman on top of him.

He was going to keep her he decided. Even after the roads cleared, even if she was forever hounding other celebrities, and even if he had to spend the rest of his life enduring her stealing his wine and ruining his steak. He'd waited too long to feel like this. It didn't matter that it had only been a few days or that all of Hollywood would think he was suffering some weird, celebrity form of Stockholm syndrome. He'd spent enough of his life playing pretend to

know something real when he felt it. Lainy was real, he wanted her, and tomorrow morning he would tell her and hope she felt the same.

Unfortunately, she answered his question before he even opened his eyes. The next morning, when he woke up, instead of a hot, sexy woman on his chest, Ash found a note with only two words scrawled across it.

I'm sorry.

Lainy was gone and she had taken her memory card and his heart with her.

Chapter 6

Two Weeks Later

Ash was in his office, staring at his computer. He was supposed to be writing a letter to his agent saying he wanted out of this Hellscape but the only thing he could think about was Lainy. She was all he'd thought about for the past two weeks. If he had thought he hated her before, it was nothing compared to the seething, furious, heartache he felt now. There was a knock at the door and since there was only one person it could be, he didn't bother masking his feelings.

"What?" he barked and his assistant, Owen, walked through the door, lips pursed, looking distinctly unamused.

"I see someone is still sulking," he said, and Ash's scowl deepened.

"Toddlers sulk, men brood."

"No, Scottish Lairds brood. This is definitely a sulk," said Owen, brushing non-existent lint off his impeccably pressed blazer. "But don't worry, I have something that I think is going to shake you out of it."

"Oh? Is it Alaina Ruiz-Ortega's traitorous heart in a box?"

"Who are you? The evil queen? No, it's not her heart but it *does* have something to do with the perplexing woman you're obsessing over."

"I'm not obsessing," said Ash, hating that he did in fact sound sulky.

"Right, then I suppose you have no interest in this?" Owen asked, producing a small manila envelope with a flourish.

Ash straightened in his chair, his own heart suddenly beating hard and fast. "What is it?"

“I thought you weren’t interested?” said Owen coyly, his fingers plucking at the suspiciously loose flap.

“Owen, I will fire you.”

Rather than putting the fear of unemployment in his assistant’s eyes, however, Owen only laughed. “See? Obsessing.” He held the envelope out and Ash snatched it from his hand.

“This has already been opened,” he said, glaring at his assistant.

“Of course it’s already been opened, it’s my job to make sure no one is sending you vials of anthrax or their underwear.” He gave a long-suffering sigh. “I now live in fear of ladies’ underwear.”

Ignoring his assistant, Ash reached inside the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of lined paper.

Dear Ash,

I’m sorry I left the way I did. Those three days were the best dream of my life and I didn’t want to wake up by hearing you say it was time for me to go.

I’m also sorry I lied about the pictures so here are the ones I didn’t take.

Now we’re even.

-Lainy

It was astonishing how in only a few short sentences she managed to level his entire world yet again. All the things he’d been telling himself over the past few weeks, *that is had just been for a story, that she was a liar, that none of it had been real*, disappeared in a splash of ink.

His hands were shaking as he turned the envelope and shook it until a small black memory card clattered onto the

desk. For a moment he just stared at it, full of hope and disbelief.

“Owen, quick, go find something I can put this into.”

From over Ash’s shoulder, Owen smirked down at him.

“This is why you’ll never actually fire me,” he said as he pulled a memory card reader connected to a USB cord out of another pocket and placed it triumphantly on the desk. “Say, ‘thank you, Owen!’”

“Thank you, Owen,” repeated Ash, plugging the USB into his laptop and sliding the card into the slot. “Now get the fuck out.”

“What!? Don’t you think I deserve to know—”

“Out!”

Grumbling, Owen left, and Ash pulled up the computer’s photo viewer. He could barely breath as the photos loaded and he clicked on the most recent before the thumbnail even came into view. It was dated two days after Lainy had left the cabin. When the picture finally came into focus, all the breath rushed out of his body.

It was Lainy and he now understood exactly what she meant about sending him the pictures she *hadn’t* taken. Rather than pictures of Ash, they were pictures of her.

In a tub.

Naked.

Flickering candles lit the bathroom she was in, the light bouncing off the frosted glass blocks that paneled the walls around the deep, square tub where Lainy stood amidst a mountain of bubbles. Her dark hair was piled like a crown on her head and she stood looking into the camera, looking at him, like a siren emerging from the depths. The flames of the candles reflected off the water on her skin so that she practically glowed, making his fingers ache with the need to touch. The resolution of the picture was so fine he could even see droplets of water sliding over the curve of her breast and

along the dip of her waist, following the same path his tongue had taken and the memory made his cock twitch.

He finally managed to tear his gaze away and click through the next few pictures. There was one of her sitting all the way in the tub, a glass of wine in one hand, a book in the other, another of her fully submerged in the water but in this one her eyes were closed, her head tilted back with a look of such pure, unadulterated pleasure on her face that it left no question as to where her fingers were and what they were doing. The last picture was of her sitting on the side of the tub, her legs spread wide and a towel clutched coyly against her breasts, the red fabric just barely managing to shield them and the sweet spot between her thighs from view.

Ash stroked a hand over the erection now pressing insistently inside his jeans and swore. He'd spent the last two weeks convincing himself that Lainy had been a mistake, that she *was* the underhanded, lying, one-dimensional villain he'd always painted her as. She'd surprised him again. These pictures were more than a gift or a promise kept, they were a declaration.

Which meant it was time to stop sulking.

With a groan, Ash let go of his cock and stood, carefully closing the pictures and then his laptop to ensure no one, like his nosy assistant, would see them. He slipped out the memory card and locked it in a desk drawer for good measure. Lainy had entrusted him with something precious, and he wasn't about to betray that trust.

Owen was leaning against the wall in the hallway, ostentatiously checking his phone but clearly hovering in hopes of an update.

"I want you to find her for me," Ash ordered and a slow, Cheshire smile spread across his assistant's face.

"Does this mean we're done sulking?"

Ash gritted his teeth. "Yes, we're done sulking."

"And if I find her, can I have a raise?"

“That’s extortion. It’s your job to get me what I need,” snapped Ash, feeling hot and frustrated. He wanted Lainy and he wanted her now.

“That’s not an answer to my question,” Owen practically sing-songed.

“Fine! Yes! You can have a raise!”

“Excellent.” Owen reached into yet another pocket and withdrew a slip of paper like some sort of obnoxious wizard. “This is her phone number, home address, and the address of her aunt and uncle’s restaurant. It’s a Friday night so I would suggest starting there first, she picks up shifts when they’re busy.”

Ash went to grab the paper, but Owen pulled it out of reach. “What was on the memory card?”

“My first guess.” He snatched the piece of paper from his confused assistant and began heading toward his garage.

“Your first guess?” Owen called after him, clearly annoyed now as well as confused.

Ash looking down at Lainy’s name scrawled across the paper and a smile broke out across his face for the first time in weeks.

“Her heart.”



Lainy’s feet hurt and her back twinged every time she leaned over to lift yet another tub full of dishes but none of that compared to the ache in her chest. It was stupid to miss someone you’d only really spent a few days with and even more stupid to think the celebrity you’d spent the past few years essentially stalking would miss you back.

She didn’t know what she had been thinking sending him those pictures. It had been a three-am fit of insanity

brought on by thoughts of him waking up to that lame note and deciding she *was* a no-good, opportunistic leech. She'd wanted him to understand that what happened between them hadn't been just glitter and paste, at least, not for her. Maybe she didn't have a chance with Ashton Scott, but perhaps she could live in a reality where he didn't despise her.

"Lainy, honey, I think it's time you took a break, you've been on your feet all day." Her uncle broke into her Ash-musings and she jumped, rattling the dishes in her tub.

"We've been busy all day," she pointed out, giving him a tired smile. He didn't smile back which was a sure sign he really was concerned. When her mom had died and she had moved in with Tía, Isabel, and Uncle Gus, it was his warm, constant smile that had gotten her through each day.

"All the more reason for you to take a break now while we're slow. Here, give me this," he took the dish tub, "I made you a plate in the kitchen, why don't you take it and go sit on the patio for a few minutes." He glanced at her short-sleeves and added, "And take a sweater."

"Alright, I'll go but call me if you need me."

Despite not feeling hungry, Lainy grabbed the plate of empanadas her uncle had left for her and walked out onto the empty patio, plopping into a chair with a grateful sigh. It was only once she'd sat down however, the cool air nipping at her bare arms, that she remembered Uncle Gus's advice about a sweater. She shivered but getting up seemed like more work than being cold. So, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth, she closed her eyes and leaned back, letting out a soft groan as the joints in her spine popped. Bussing tables was a hell of a lot harder than stalking celebrities. Unfortunately, she thought she might be doing a lot more of the former than the latter in the future since the thought of chasing after anyone besides Ash made her feel ill.

Which was probably wrong on multiple levels.

Lainy dropped her head onto the table and sighed. "You're a twisted, lovesick idiot, Ortega," she muttered into the glass.

Something soft dropped around her shoulders, fending off the evening chill and she spoke without bothering to lift her head. “Thank you, Uncle Gus.”

“It’s not Uncle Gus and why do I always find you out in the cold?”

Lainy’s whole body went tight and her heart felt like it had just swan-dived over a cliff. No. He wouldn’t be here. He *couldn’t*. This was a dream. Or a hallucination. That was more likely. When was the last time she’d managed to sleep?

“This isn’t happening,” she muttered, banging her head on the table and willing the hallucination away. “Ashton Scott is not at my family’s restaurant.”

“I’ll remind you that Ashton Scott can do whatever the fuck he wants, and I am at your family’s restaurant despite the fact it was a two-hour drive from Malibu and traffic was a bitch.” She felt a strong, familiar hand slide along the back of her neck and squeeze. “Look at me, lovely girl.”

Tears pressed against the back of Lainy’s eyes, and she looked up to find him standing over her, tall, broad, and so handsome that someone somewhere was no doubt adding another lock of his perfectly red-tinged hair to a shrine.

“You’re here,” she said, paralyzed by disbelief.

“I’m here,” he confirmed, his eyes tracing hungrily over her like it had been years rather than only a few weeks since they had seen each other.

“I thought I was the stalker in this relationship,” she said, horrified when her voice wobbled.

“Well, you’ve been falling down on the job, Ortega. I haven’t seen you hiding in my bushes or waiting outside a restaurant in two goddamn weeks. I know because I looked. Every single goddamn day.”

“I’m sorry?” she said, her fingers curling possessively into the sweater he’d put around her.

“First you leave me alone in that cold-ass cabin, then you quit showing up to work, and then you send me those

fucking pictures.”

“You didn’t like the pictures?”

“I loved the pictures.”

“Oh...then why do you sound so angry?”

“Because you left, Lainy! You made me fall in love with you and then you left!”

“I didn’t think you would actually want me around,” she said weakly. “That’s kind of been the entire basis of our relationship.”

Ash let out a frustrated huff and yanked her chair around so that he could loom over her, their faces only inches apart.

“When has that ever stopped Lainy Ruiz-Ortega from taking her shot?”

Lainy’s brain felt like it was made of taffy, his words slowly turning over in her brain. “Wait, did you just say you loved me?”

“Yes, you ridiculous woman and judging by those pictures, you love me too.”

He was so close, and his eyes were so blue, like the hottest part of a flame or the sky on a freezing winter day. Of course she loved him, she had loved him since the first time he looked into the lens of her camera. That first picture was the one she’d never sold, the one she kept buried in the sock drawer in her bedroom.

Lainy slowly began to nod.

“Yes, I do. I love you.”

And just like that, Ash grinned, not his perfect, red-carpet smile but something a little crooked and completely honest.

“Are you sure this isn’t a dream?” she asked.

“I’m positive. This is completely real, lovely girl.” Then he leaned forward the rest of the way and kissed her. The

last thing Lainy heard before she lost herself in this wonderful new reality was the click of a camera shutter snapping closed.

Celebz! Exclusive!

*Actor Ashton Scott was recently seen kissing a woman at a small tapas restaurant in Atwater. **Celebz!** has confirmed that the woman in question is celebrity photographer Alaina Ruiz-Ortega and it seems that Ortega has captured more than just Scott's picture! An insider source says Ortega and Scott are officially dating and have already met each other's families! Clearly the former ice between these two has melted into something hot, hot, hot! Make sure to pick up next week's **Celebz!** to read more about this star-crossed couple!*

Author's Note

Hello friends! I hope you enjoyed this little novelette (I suppose others might call it a long short story), formerly published in Violet Gaze Press's "Enemies to Lovers Vol. 2" anthology. This is my favorite trope and this idea had been kicking around my head for years so when the initial call for short stories came, these characters and this story really just came and kicked the door in. I wound up really loving Lainy and Ashton and wish I could have spent more time with them but in the end, I think the story came out exactly the way it needed to be.

If you enjoyed this, please consider leaving a review and also consider checking out my other works which are a little longer (although not by much) and much, MUCH steamier—perfect for a cold, snowy winter cabin really.

XOXO,

Ellie