

SPIKED

HOT

Chocolate



RILZY ADAMS

Spiked Hot Chocolate

Rilzy Adams

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Edited by A.K Edits (@adotkredits)

For everyone who has been patient with me this year.

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BEFORE YOU DIVE IN

I hope you enjoy Cosima and Tristan as much as I did bringing them to life.

Please note that this novella contains on page sex.

Happy reading!

Chapter 1

Cosima

“I’ll be okay,” Cosima said with a small sigh before she corrected herself. “I *am* okay. Don’t worry about me, and don’t even dare think about canceling your cruise.”

“Simmy.”

Her mother’s tone was filled with enough pity and dogged determination that Cosima couldn’t help but shake her head even though Dorothy Stratton couldn’t see her through the phone.

“Ma.”

Cosima tried to keep her voice steady and patient, knowing that any hint of emotion would only add to her mother’s belief that she was not okay.

She stirred a dollop of honey into her morning oatmeal before she continued, “You and daddy planned this cruise months ago. There is absolutely no need for you to change your plans because you want to baby me. I’m not going to allow you to throw away something you’ve been looking forward to when I’m fine. Breakups happen every day. I’m old enough to pull on my big girl panties and keep it pushing.”

There was silence on the line, and for a brief moment, Cosima believed her mother had listened to reason. She should’ve known better. Cosima couldn’t think of a scenario where reason stood a chance against a mother’s fear that her child was in crisis. It definitely wasn’t *this* one.

“Breakups may happen every day, but let’s not pretend this is an average breakup. You and Damian were together for seven years, and the breakup happened *right* before Christmas.”

Cosima licked the back of her spoon and tossed it into her farmhouse-style kitchen sink, trying to think of the best way to appease her mother. She wanted to remind her that breakups were known for being inconvenient and that Thanksgiving was hardly *right before Christmas*. However, voicing those thoughts would probably add more fuel to her mother’s fire to argue, and Cosima was not in the mood. She wanted to bring her oatmeal to the tawny L-shaped couch pushed against the longest wall of her living room so she could wrap up in the burgundy blanket she kept thrown over the back and enjoy her breakfast while she caught up with the TV show she’d recently become obsessed with.

“I’m pretty sure I’ll find ways to amuse myself during what you *think* is a very trying time for me. There’s nothing that a Christmas sale at Sephora won’t solve.”

“Don’t be flippant, Cosima,” her mother said. There was a firming up of her tone that made Cosima roll her eyes heavenward. She had about five seconds to convince her lovely, beautiful, devoted — if not a little bit overbearing — mother that canceling the twelve-day cruise she and father had been planning for over a year wasn’t a good idea. And even less time to get off the phone before Dorothy suggested Cosima join her disgustingly loved-up parents as a third wheel on the trip.

“I will be fine,” she said, trying to make her voice sound extra certain. “I’m using the time to finish up a bunch of work I want to get done before the new year. The only thing I plan to break for is to put up my Christmas tree, and I’ll pop by Navaya’s on Christmas Day so I can have a homecooked meal.”

Cosima hoped the well-placed lie would silence her mother. She was *depending* on it, even though she wished she hadn’t had to resort to such tactics. It wasn’t that she didn’t understand her mother’s concern. She understood her friends’

concern too. Even the concern of the random acquaintances who popped up when whispers about her relationship's demise started circulating made sense in theory. But she was fine. Maybe *too* fine. Perhaps that was where the real concern lay.

Damian hadn't surprised her with the proposal everyone thought would happen on Thanksgiving. His family had been so sure that his sister had started dropping hints in the months leading up to the holiday and went as far as telling Cosima she needed to make sure her nails were on point for the family dinner. Cosima hadn't dared voice her discomfort at the situation to anyone, but she'd spent the entirety of Thanksgiving dinner feeling anxious and jittery, dreading what seemed like an inevitability. The proposal never came, though. They'd returned to their hotel room in Denver after spending the evening gorging on sweet potato pies, turkey, and the baked macaroni and cheese his grandmother never failed to put her foot into in the five years Cosima had been spending Thanksgiving with his family, and he'd poured himself a large glass of vodka. Considering how infrequently Damian drank anything stronger than an IPA, Cosima immediately knew what he was trying to work up the courage to do. Her stomach twisted into ribbons, but soon an emotion she was still embarrassed to admit to everyone who rushed to her comfort afterward settled over her...relief.

She and Damian had been moving along in their relationship off the back of their familiarity with each other and the good times...*really good times*...they'd had in the past. Damian was solid and dependable, excellent in communication, even better in bed, and a perfect physical specimen. That was why Cosima had become excellent at ignoring the pangs of '*this can't be it*' that sometimes stuttered in her chest, leaving her feeling disappointed in herself.

She was perfectly content with Damian, even if sometimes a bit disconnected, but Cosima had assumed they would just continue meandering toward all the other checkbox stages of life. The engagement, the marriage, the house, the kids.

Damian put an end to all of that in the dim lighting of their hotel room in quiet, soothing tones and a voice laced with

regret.

“We’ve been just going through the motions for a while now,” he’d said, brushing his hand across his face as he moved next to Cosima, where she sat on the bed with her back ramrod straight and body stiff. “I’m sorry.”

“Say something,” Damian urged after a few seconds passed while Cosima tried to process the avalanche of emotions she felt because rejection *always* stung — it didn’t matter that she could feel the first wisps of relief gathering like smoke in the pit of her stomach. Then, of course, guilt showed up to join the party of emotions that made it hard for her to breathe.

“You’re right,” she admitted after another few seconds ticked by, managing a small smile at the relief visibly snaking its way through her now ex-boyfriend’s body.

Seven years.

Cosima couldn’t believe seven years ended just like that. There were neither fireworks nor a bang. It ended as smoothly as the formalization of a well-negotiated business transaction.

Now *that* stung.

“I don’t understand,” she’d said when she was finally able to find her voice. “Why now? If we’ve been going through the motions, what made you decide to end it on *Thanksgiving*?”

His skin, the shade of toasted almonds, blanched a little. “This is the exact opposite of what I planned to do tonight.”

Damian reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black velvet box. “I was going to propose.”

A gurgle of laughter, more hysterical than amused, spilled from Cosima’s mouth. “Don’t get me wrong. You made the right decision. I just can’t figure out how you got here.”

“Work emailed me while we were playing charades after dinner,” he said. “I didn’t get the promotion I’d applied for within the company, but they offered me a higher-grade position at one of our partner companies...in Toronto. So many exciting things flashed through my mind as I

immediately accepted the offer without thinking twice about consulting you. Then I spent the entire night thinking about what living in Toronto would be like, but I wasn't envisioning *us*. It was the wake-up call I needed. Somewhere along the line going through the motions would become resentment, and I didn't want that...not with you. I wanted to end things when there was at least a chance we might have a shot at still being friends."

That was a month ago, and Cosima was still spending almost every waking moment trying to convince her closest friends and family that she was fine. It didn't help her case when she decided she was going to spend Christmas on her own. Her mother and father had booked a cruise, so she'd initially planned to spend Christmas with Damian and his family, but now she just really wanted to have a low-key day at home.

"Cosima Rose Stratton," her mother grouched. "I might have been born in the nighttime, but I wasn't born last night. I know you're not planning to go to Navaya's for dinner. Why did you have to go bring that sweet girl into your lies?"

"I'll be fine, Ma, I promise. I'm not in bed crying into Damian's old shirts. I'm okay. I just want to spend some time by myself this year. I want to watch a bunch of Christmas movies without worrying that I'm ruining someone else's day."

Dorothy sighed wearily as if she was sure that Cosima orchestrated the breakup just to find a way to make *her* life miserable. "Okay, Simmy. If you say so..."

"And I do."

"... just make sure you know we're here if you change your mind."

"I know, and I love you for it," Cosima said with a smile. "You go ahead and enjoy yourself — rekindle those sparks with daddy that I do not want to think about."

"Goodbye, lil' girl," Dorothy said with a chuckle. "I love you too."

Cosima was still smiling as she disconnected the call and turned back to her desktop to continue with the copyedits she really wanted to complete before the time she promised herself she'd end her workday. She wondered how many more conversations like this she would have in the week leading up to Christmas. Just the thought of having to repeatedly defend her decision while people tried to figure out if she was really okay made her stomach cramp up with unease.

Merry Christmas, indeed.

Chapter 2

Tristan

Tristan shifted Nia to the other side of his body so he could get a better grip on the dead weight his daughter had become after falling asleep on the car ride home. He snuggled her close and ran to her mother's front door, hoping to spare his sleeping baby girl a little bit of leftover chill from the unexpected snowfall that had covered Maryland earlier that week. He'd go get her coat and other belongings later. Lorraine answered the door before he knocked, so Tristan assumed she was watching from the front windows. He moved to offer the four-year-old to her mother, but his ex-wife shook her head and said, "Bring her in and put her to bed. I need to talk to you."

Tristan paused for a split second before he followed Lorraine into the house, walking down halls he hadn't been privy to until that point. She stopped in front of an open door. He took his first step into his daughter's room, smiling at the pops of pink and purple and immediately knew how much the little girl must adore her room. He laid her down on the double bed with the fluffy purple blankets and planted a kiss on her forehead. Lorraine came up behind him and helped remove Nia's boots before gesturing for him to meet in the hallway. He took in his little sleeping beauty with her smooth dark skin, a nose that reminded him so much of his own mother's, and the way her thumb found her mouth even as she slept. He kissed her cheek once again before his curiosity had him following the path back to the living room while trying not to be nosy about Lorraine's space. The entire interaction was weird. Tristan wasn't quite sure what to make of it. He took a

seat on the brown couch opposite where his ex-wife sat in a turquoise armchair, trying to decipher what the hell was going on. Lorraine, for her part, was behaving like it was normal for her to invite him in when he dropped Nia home and normal to offer him “something to drink?”

“Look,” he said with a small chuckle, “I’ll have you know I changed the beneficiary of my life insurance policies as soon as the divorce came through.”

Lorraine’s deep brown eyes widened with amusement as she sucked her teeth. “Shut up, Tristan. You play too much.”

“Me? Play? You telling me this is normal? Feels kinda setup-ish...”

“Because I invited you in?” Lorraine drawled. “Boy, please. I just need to run something by you.”

Maybe it was the way she could no longer meet his eyes or how she kept trying to smooth down her burgundy locs, but Tristan suddenly got the feeling he was really going to hate the words about to come out of her mouth.

He sat up straighter. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“I know you were supposed to have Nia all Christmas this year...”

“No.”

Lorraine visibly deflated, her dark brown skin losing some of its glow as she moved to sit next to him on the couch. “You haven’t even heard my proposition.”

“I’ve been looking forward to having Nia for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day all damn year, Lorraine. I don’t want to renegotiate the days. I bought the largest Christmas tree that can fit in my house and paid someone to decorate it in all her favorite colors. Nah...”

The indignation flowed out of him when he took another look at his ex-wife and realized she might just burst into tears. He sighed. Lorraine and Tristan’s marriage had been disastrous, but they had come together to do their best to put Nia’s well-being first. They were better co-parents than they’d

ever been partners, and Lorraine never tried to make life difficult for him just for the hell of it. He owed it to her, he guessed, to at least hear what she had to say.

“What’s going on?”

Lorraine took a deep breath, and as the words started spilling from her mouth, Tristan began to kiss the idyllic Christmas he’d planned to have with his daughter goodbye.

“Jack and I planned to get married in Barbados in the summer,” she said. His gaze dropped to the engagement ring she’d been sporting for a little over six months now. She’d started dating his exact opposite about a year after their divorce. Jack was light-skinned where he was dark, solidly built where he was on the slimmer side, shorter where he was tall, and worked in insurance while Tristan owned a tattoo shop and dabbled with selling artistic prints on his website. They were alike in the one way that mattered to him, though, and that was when it came to their adoration for the little girl sleeping in the next room. He liked Jack enough that he’d been delighted when he proposed, knowing that Nia was gaining a great bonus dad.

“Yeah?” he said. “I doubt I’m on the invite list, and I’ve got no idea what that has to do with you wanting to change our Christmas arrangements.”

Lorraine laughed softly, more at ease now Tristan had dropped his attitude.

“If you would just let me get it out, TJ.”

He chuckled. “Damn. It’s been forever since you called me that. You must really be down bad.”

“One of the reasons we wanted to get married in Barbados besides me liking the idea of a tropical wedding is because he’s originally from there and liked the idea of having all his family present. We just got news that his grandmother, who practically raised him, isn’t doing very well, so we want to push the wedding up to Christmas. I don’t want to get married without my baby, Tristan.”

“Wow,” Tristan joked. “You’re not even playing fair.”

“I really hate doing this. Trust me, as much as you’ve been looking forward to your daddy-daughter Christmas celebration, Nia has been looking forward to it even more. If you agree, because I’m in no way suggesting you don’t have a choice, you can have her for all the major holidays next year, and I guess you can recreate your Christmas a week late.”

He wanted to say no. He wanted to be selfish enough to demand he get the time with Nia he’d been looking forward to, planning for, and even adjusting his business opening hours to accommodate. The time he’d planned to be so selfish with that he’d refused his mother’s continuous pleas that he bring Nia to Florida so they could spend Christmas with the rest of the extended family. He *really* wanted to. But he couldn’t.

There would be more Christmases, but hopefully, Lorraine would never have another wedding day. At four, Nia had no real concept of time anyway, so it would be just as much Christmas to her when she returned from Barbados as it would be in four days once the Christmas tree stayed up and the gifts remained under the tree. There was only one decision he could make when all was said and done.

“I guess I get to go figure out what I’ll do with all that time I blocked off,” he said, knowing he sounded defeated but not too pressed about it. He was agreeing to this because it was the right thing to do. That didn’t mean he needed to pretend he wasn’t disappointed.

Lorraine smiled widely at him, gratitude shimmering around her. Perhaps if they were closer — if things had ended better — she might have pulled him in for a friendly hug. Instead, she nodded at him and showed him to the door with noticeably lighter steps.

“I owe you,” she whispered once he returned the rest of Nia’s stuff from the car.

“That you do,” he responded, but his voice was light. He gave her a small salute and headed back to his car to contemplate how his plans to have the perfect Christmas had shattered in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 3

Cosima

Cosima removed her large square-shaped tortoiseshell glasses, rubbed her eyes, and rolled her shoulders back, trying to stretch out the tension gathered there from the hours she'd spent at her computer finishing the last bit of work she needed to get done before she could officially log out for Christmas.

She couldn't believe that despite what she told her mother, she hadn't started preparing for Christmas yet.

It was the day before Christmas Eve, and she still hadn't selected a Christmas tree, much less figured out a theme so she could begin purchasing décor.

She knew her mother thought her decision to spend Christmas alone meant she would be weeping in bed, cuddled up in one of Damian's shirts, but Cosima still intended to have a full Christmas experience. She was looking forward to being able to spend Christmas on her own terms. She wouldn't have to consider anyone else's plans and would be free to snuggle in her favorite onesie while she watched the only two *Home Alone* movies that counted before settling in with a good Christmas meal and a holiday-themed romance novel. It mightn't be the ideal Christmas for everyone, but Cosima was almost giddy with excitement at being able to spend Christmas in a way Damian had refused to on at least two occasions.

Cosima's stomach grumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten much that day, only picking at snacks while she lost herself in the beautiful words of her friend and client Navaya's latest novel. She crossed the small distance from the nook

overlooking her apartment's courtyard, where she'd set up a desk so she could have a workspace that let the light in. She rummaged through the fridge, knowing that although she had all the ingredients needed to create a tasty, filling meal, she'd much rather have someone else do the heavy lifting. It didn't take long for her to decide she was going to order food but figured at the last minute that it might be good for her to leave the apartment since she'd been holed up there all day while she finished her copyedits. She decided on her favorite restaurant in downtown Silver Spring, a family-owned place known for its amazing crab cakes and hearty sides. The crab cakes were good enough to fight over, but Cosima was looking forward to getting her mouth on their baked macaroni and cheese.

She took her time getting ready, lingering under the steamy shower, lathering her coconut-scented body wash, which always left her skin feeling super luxurious. She donned her favorite pair of black jeans with a deep green knit sweater that never failed to keep her warm but also made her feel confident and sexy. Cosima checked herself in her hallway mirror, approving her fit before grabbing her boots from the hall closet along with her coat.

Cosima was one of those people who actively enjoyed winter. She enjoyed how quickly it got dark, she enjoyed the way she was able to bundle up, and she enjoyed the chill. She wasn't sure if it was because it fell in the middle of her favorite season, but Christmas was hands down Cosima's favorite holiday of the year, and she wasn't shy about making sure everybody knew how much she loved all of it: the coziness, the lights, the music, the feeling of optimism that seemed to hang in the air.

She shouldn't have been surprised that everyone closest to her was concerned her breakup with Damian may have ruined her favorite time of year.

She was waiting on her apartment's elevator when her cell phone rang. Cosima glanced at her phone and grinned when she realized her best friend, Audrey, was calling.

“Are you calling to do Dorothy Stratton’s bidding?” Cosima asked by way of introduction. She expected Audrey to beat around the bush, but her best friend chose to be straight up instead of pretending her mother hadn’t tried to launch a sneak attack. She appreciated the logic of her mother’s reasoning. If she was afraid or ashamed to open up to Dorothy, who else could she be honest with other than the woman who’d grown up with her, from pigtails to navigating the highs and lows of an adulthood nobody could ever be prepared for?

“I’m fine, Auds,” she said with a small chuckle. “Although I’m honestly getting kinda aggravated at how everybody seems convinced I’m lying or something.”

Her best friend laughed. “Being dramatic suits you. Keep it up. Look, I understand how frustrating it might be, but it’s not like you’d be acting any differently if you were concerned for someone you cared about.”

“I get that,” she said, stepping onto the elevator and pressing the button that would take her to the lobby. “But I’ve been patient explaining that I’m okay. Half the reason I’m choosing to spend Christmas alone is because I really don’t want to deal with the same concern you’re talking about. I don’t want people looking at me with sympathy-filled eyes over their glasses of eggnog, and I don’t want anybody to think I’m pretending to be okay when they see I’m fine.” She allowed her voice to soften. “Too fine, perhaps.”

Audrey didn’t speak right away. Cosima figured she was trying to take in that tidbit of information, so she waited in silence until her friend quipped, “You’re either in shock, or you’ve just accepted your relationship needed to be taken off life support at least two years ago.”

Cosima’s mouth dropped open. “Oh no, you’re dead wrong for that.”

Audrey didn’t backtrack, but Cosima hadn’t expected her to. Instead, her boisterous laughter filled the phone. She could imagine her friend sitting on her couch, braids pulled up into an updo, sipping on wine as she said, “I will always call a spade a spade, boo. Why are you getting at me for treating you

the way you claim you want to be treated? No babying here... no tiptoeing. Just the truth. You know I have love for your ex, but I watched you guys be good until you were just...meh. I'm happy that both of you get to find your person."

Cosima snorted. "I'm not trying to find anything other than as many crab cakes as I can stomach and several glasses of Prosecco."

"You are fine, though, right?" Audrey asked after a while, bringing the conversation back to where it started. "You're sure you want to spend Christmas alone?"

"I'm sure," Cosima soothed. "I'll let you know if I suddenly have any regrets. You and everybody else."

"You better," Audrey said. "Okay, I'll call your mother and let her know I've assessed the situation, and she can get on that flight tonight."

Cosima rolled her eyes. Her mother was the most stubborn woman in the world. Audrey shushed her when she expressed her frustration, letting her know that she was just as stubborn as her mother...if not more.

Cosima considered whether she should call Dorothy to try to reassure her once more that she was going to be perfectly fine but decided against it, realizing it was better to let her think her undercover mission went smoothly.

She was ravenous by the time she finally arrived at the small family-owned restaurant she frequented as often as she could. She was happy she made it before the evening hustle and bustle truly began, managing to snag her favorite table next to a window overlooking the street where she could people-watch while she enjoyed her meal. She pulled out her e-reader and got settled into a book she'd been dying to read but had to put off while she finished her last editing gig. She was so engrossed in the love story unfolding on her screen that she barely noticed that the restaurant had started filling up. It wasn't until her server, a young woman called Jules who she had a decent relationship with, came to her gently tapping the table to get her attention.

“Crap, I startled you,” Jules said with a small smile. “That book must be really good.”

Cosima smiled. “They always are. What’s up?”

“I need a favor,” Jules said, turning so she could point across the restaurant to a family of four standing in the space next to the door where people usually congregated while they waited to be seated during peak times.

“They’re regulars, and you see that little one in the pink dress and her braids in Minnie Mouse ears? It’s her birthday, and she specifically requested to come eat here. We’ve got a wait time of about forty-five minutes, and her mom was saying they might just have to go somewhere else because the kid is hungry and grumpy. There’s a man sitting at a four-person table who was going to have the food I just put in front of him wrapped up so he could give them his table, but I felt bad. I asked him if he’d be willing to share with someone who probably wouldn’t even notice him, and he was game. So... could I set him up next to you? I’ll give you a complimentary drink.”

Cosima smiled. This was one of the reasons she loved family-run establishments. Jules took giving good customer service very seriously and always did her best to go above and beyond for their regulars.

“You know you don’t have to give me a complimentary anything,” she said. “I don’t mind at all. Besides, you’re right about me not even noticing him for how good this damn book is.”

Jules flashed her a grateful smile before moving to the other end of the restaurant. The man was sitting with his back turned, so she couldn’t decipher much about him other than he was Black and that his hair was cut into a low fade. Cosima turned her attention back to her book, picking up where she’d left off in the middle of a heated fight between the lead characters. She hadn’t been lying when she told Jules she probably wouldn’t even notice her prospective tablemate for how captivated she was by the book.

She was, however, dead wrong. It seemed like *all* she could do was notice the man. She became hyperaware of his presence right away. His cologne was citrusy, topped off with bold, spicy notes that floated across her senses, causing her to lift her eyes from her e-reader to be met with... *Wow*. She had to command her eyes to move away from the man who stood at the table dressed in a red sweater that she briefly and immediately imagined peeling off him. He was skinnier than the men she usually went for, but the magnetic pull she felt for him had her remembering when Audrey teased that skinny guys were skinny because all their weight went to one place and one place only.

Cosima's neck went hot as if the man was privy to her increasingly disgusting thoughts, and she forced herself to focus on his face so she would stop imagining the size of his dick. His skin was a smooth, deep brown, which became the perfect canvas for eyes that could urge her to tell her deepest secrets if he gave her *just* the right look and lips that curved into a warm smile, revealing the sexiest teeth she'd ever seen. She almost giggled at that. How weird did you have to be to find yourself attracted to teeth?

"Jules tells me you're willing to sacrifice some of your personal space so that little girl can have the birthday meal she wanted."

Cosima opened her mouth, but words weren't forthcoming. His voice, as deep as it was and just a bit gravelly, rubbed against her senses much in the same way her coconut body wash had moved against her skin: smooth, silky, luxurious.

"Thanks for helping me accommodate them," he said again, settling into his chair and placing his beer on the table.

"It's nothing," Cosima said, happy she was finally able to find her voice. "I'll just be sitting here with my nose in this book for my entire meal, anyway."

He smiled at her then. It was open and full of charm, and Cosima found herself squirming in her chair. Was *this* what attraction felt like? Had things really been so dull between her

and her ex that she was ready to combust in the presence of the first very attractive man to get within a few feet of her?

“I’ll leave you to it then,” he said, a warm smile still plastered on his face, and Cosima instantly regretted telling him she planned to spend the time reading. Initial plan be damned, she’d much rather spend her time making small talk with the man sitting opposite her. She flashed Jules a smile as the younger woman put his crab cakes, coleslaw, and potato salad in front of him. Jules caught her looking and flashed her a smile that seemed to scream, “*I know, sis. I know.*”

Cosima tried to get back into the book, but it didn’t matter how much she tried to focus; her eyes kept wandering to the man sitting opposite her, cataloging little things like the length and thickness of his fingers as he tapped against the table to the upbeats of the jazzy rendition of Christmas carols that wafted through the restaurant’s speakers. She averted her gaze whenever he happened to look up from whatever he was staring intently at on his phone.

Calm down.

Cosima would have laughed at her comical behavior if it wasn’t so damn cringy. She was grateful when Jules finally returned with her drink, hoping the Prosecco would help take the edge off whatever it was that her nerves decided they’d rather do than allow her to finish her novel.

Sipping on her drink, Cosima tried once more to delve back into her book when the vibration of the man’s phone against the table had her looking up.

“Sorry,” he mouthed with a shy smile before answering the call.

Mind your own business, she thought, dipping her eyes to her e-reader even though she wasn’t focused on anything.

“I’m fine,” he was saying. Cosima caught her bottom lip between her teeth. He had such a delicious voice.

“I appreciate that you and mom are worried about me,” he continued. “But there’s no way in hell I’m going to be braving holiday travel to come home. I’ll be fine on my own.”

Cosima couldn't stop the knowing smile from spreading across her face. It seemed she wasn't the only one trying to navigate familial Christmas drama.

"I'll be fine. It was the right thing to do. I'll just watch as many Christmas movies as I can to pass the time. Nia will be back before I know it, and we'll be able to celebrate Christmas then."

Cosima felt herself deflate a little, and she chuckled at how ridiculous she was. Where the hell did she get off, being disappointed that this man whose name she didn't even know had a partner?

She didn't avert her gaze quickly enough, and this time, he caught her looking.

"I'm sorry," he started to say. "This is the opposite of the quiet reading time you expected to have tonight."

Cosima brushed him off. "*I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have been eavesdropping on your conversation. It's just that I'm spending Christmas alone too, and I've been having very similar conversations with my own parents. You'd think I'd chosen banishment or something."

His laughter was filled with genuine warmth and amusement, and Cosima's traitorous belly fluttered at the sound.

"So how did you come to be spending Christmas alone?" he asked. "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

She started to speak but stopped so she could thank Jules as she put the plate of crab cakes with a generous serving of baked macaroni and cheese in front of her. She shut off her e-reader and put it in her bag, sensing she probably wouldn't return to her book.

"That I can do."

Chapter 4

Tristan

The woman sitting across from him was beautiful. He'd immediately felt guilty when Jules told him the person who'd agreed to him sitting at their table would be busy reading a book. He wasn't a reader per se, but his older sister, Rebecca, was, and Tristan remembered how much she treasured what she called her reading dates when she took herself out for her favorite foods and devoured a novel.

Guilt aside, Tristan knew his disruption was a necessary evil. Perhaps he was still rubbed a little raw, having just returned from dropping Nia back at Lorraine's after taking her out for ice cream and cookies, knowing the Christmas he'd planned for them both wouldn't happen the way he envisioned it. Or maybe it was because he understood as a parent how hard it was to disappoint a child looking forward to something. It was plain to see that the little girl had been looking forward to the dinner from the way she bounced in place in her tiny sneakers and kept tugging at her parents as if to ask them when they would finally get their chance to sit and eat. He'd planned to keep his head down, eat his food, and leave as quickly as he could but was immediately drawn to the woman whose table he crashed. And how could he not? Her black hair with its brown highlights fell to her shoulders. The green sweater she was wearing, though thick, didn't hide her curves. She had the face of an angel, light brown skin, cheeks that formed the cutest apples when she smiled, and honeyed eyes which sparkled as she observed him. Her lips, though? If her face was of the angels, her lips seemed like they would lead angels straight to hell.

He was sure it'd be worth every second.

Tristan was sitting with that revelation when his phone rang. He considered ignoring the call when he noticed his parents' number flashing on the ID, but that was only for a split second. Everybody swore their mothers were omniscient while they were growing up, but Tristan was pretty sure his mother could still tell when she was being ignored, and she always gave him hell for it. He noticed the woman sitting next to him look up from her tablet and felt immediate guilt at being a distraction, mouthing sorry to her before he went ahead and connected the call. Relief rushed through Tristan when he was greeted by his father's deep, gruff voice. That relief was short-lived once it became apparent his father was just doing his mother's bidding. He'd already told her that he had no plans to travel during the Christmas period, nor was he interested in spending the day with his friends and their families. He preferred a low-key day on his own. He didn't even try to hide the fact that it was because he would likely be moping about Nia being away. Tristan thought it was as valid an excuse as any, but his mother did not. She predictably took offense to that. It was one thing telling the family he was skipping Christmas because he was spending quality time with his daughter, but it was something else altogether when the reason was one she couldn't quite understand, much less try to explain to his many aunts whose children wouldn't dare ditch Christmas.

Tristan was in the middle of doubling down to his father that his mind couldn't be changed about celebrating Christmas in Florida when he noticed the woman smile. All thoughts fled from his mind for a few seconds at how her smile lit up her entire face. He'd thought she was beautiful before, but now he wanted to do anything...whatever he could...to keep seeing her smile. *Damn.* He struggled to refocus on the conversation with his dad and was happy when he finally disconnected the call. He looked up and found his tablemate looking at him with the oddest expression on her face. His guilt rose to the forefront of his mind.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This is the opposite of the quiet reading time you expected to have tonight."

She was gracious, choosing to pretend like his presence wasn't messing with the entire vibe she was going for. He was surprised when she fed him a tidbit about also being on her own for Christmas, and Tristan immediately knew he wanted to keep the conversation going, even if it just meant that he'd have a bit more time to bask in the musicality of her voice and watch animated expressions move across her beautiful face.

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours," he said, not wanting to waste the opportunity to get a conversation started. He could see her thinking about it before she finally put her tablet away and smiled at him.

"My boyfriend dumped me on Thanksgiving," she said. Her facial expression was amused, and there was a self-deprecating tinge to her voice, but Tristan found he couldn't tell how she felt about the situation. He didn't know if he should offer empathy or congratulations, so he stuck with what he knew for sure was the truth.

"What I'm hearing is your ex is the kind of man who makes bad decisions?"

Her lips curved into the hugest smile before peals of melodic laughter spilled from her mouth.

"He made the right decision," she said after her laughter died down. "He made the decision I was too chickenshit to make. My ex was — is — great. It's just that over the seven years we were together, we grew apart, and I didn't want to leave something that was mostly okay, you know?"

"I don't," Tristan admitted. "My ex-wife and I started dating when we were young, and when we grew in separate ways, things weren't okay. They were toxic as all hell. We were on and off for a good few years when breakup sex led to a pregnancy, and so we both did the most foolish thing you could do in a situation like that — we got married."

Tristan shook his head slightly as he thought of just how quickly after their courthouse wedding both he and Lorraine realized they had made a mistake.

“We stuck it out for another year and a half before we realized we weren’t doing our daughter any favors by creating a household where her parents were always at each other’s throats.”

She raised her wine glass and motioned it toward him, clinking their drinks together when he finally got the point and raised his beer.

“Here’s to making mature, reasonable decisions for the sake of a little human who didn’t ask to be here.”

He chuckled. “And we’ve kept on making them...hence me sitting in this restaurant with the intention of having my favorite meal while I mope about not having my daughter with me for Christmas.”

Understanding dawned in those beautiful eyes. “Oh, Nia?”

Tristan smiled the way he smiled whenever he thought of the vivacious, giggly, intuitive little girl he had the privilege of nurturing through life. “She’ll be five in February. I was supposed to have her from tomorrow until Christmas, but her mother had a very special moment she wanted to share with her, and I couldn’t stand in the way of that.”

Her smile softened. “Much like you couldn’t stand in the way of that family getting your table.”

“Guilty.”

“What I’m hearing is that you’re a sweetheart.”

“I’m not sure I’d say all that,” he said with a grin, but she waved him off.

“You don’t have to. I just did.” She immediately burst out laughing, and he shot her a perplexed look, eventually joining in the laughter when she explained, “I’m here offering pronouncements on your personality when I don’t even know your name.”

“Come through, Alicia Keys,” Tristan teased.

“That song went the other way,” the woman he was increasingly becoming interested in said right before she moved into belting out the chorus of the song.

“Wow,” he responded. “I was just teasing, but you got some pipes on you. I’m Tristan.”

“Cosima,” she said, offering her hand to him. “It’s been nice to meet you.”

Nice doesn’t even begin to describe it, he thought, but Tristan focused on enveloping her smaller hand in his own, amazed at how good it felt to touch her.

Tristan ignored the pang of loss he felt when she withdrew her hand and returned to eating her food as they continued their conversation. It flowed so easily he caught himself being quiet once or twice, marveling at the serendipity of it all. She was witty and goofy and passionate about so many things that he was sure he could sit and listen to her talk forever. She painted her job as an editor of novels so vividly that he couldn’t help but wonder if she moonlighted as an author herself. He found himself telling her about the detailed schedule he’d had planned for Nia and how much he’d been looking forward to taking her ice skating on Christmas Eve.

“I think I might go by myself,” he said. “I’m assuming that this is a judgment-free zone where I can admit I might have been looking forward to skating myself even more than taking her.”

Cosima laughed. “I think you should go. If you chicken out when you get there, you can grab a coffee and watch other people having fun. I like the idea of ice skating, but I’m afraid of busting my ass even more, so I’m always content to just watch. I’m so clumsy that I’ve realized the only thing these legs are made to do is walk — no heels, no wheels, none of that.”

She reached for her drink and seemed shocked to find it empty, just as she had the last two times she’d reached for the glass. Tristan wondered if she, like him, was amazed at how easily the conversation flowed. It flowed straight through their meal, a second round of drinks, and then a third. Tristan found himself sliding the menu over to her and asking about dessert just to prolong the inevitable end of their conversation.

He worried she would immediately say no to dessert but was relieved when she started browsing the menu.

“I’m not sure I should have anything else,” she said eventually. “I’m stuffed.”

“How about coffee?”

She made a face. “At this time of night? Absolutely not. I’d be bouncing off walls.”

He gave her a sly smile. “It was worth a shot. I’m running out of ways to keep you here.”

Cosima didn’t respond immediately, and Tristan found himself backtracking. “Was that creepy? I didn’t mean for it to be creepy.”

“No, not at all,” she said, a wide smile blossoming on her face. “I just thought I was the one keeping you here.”

Tristan returned her smile. “Maybe we’re keeping each other.”

Chapter 5

Cosima

Maybe we're keeping each other.

The idea that he was enjoying her company just as much as she was enjoying his shouldn't thrill Cosima as much as it did, but she couldn't help grinning up at Tristan like a middle schooler who'd finally gotten the attention of her crush.

Wisps of excitement and attraction fluttered deep in Cosima's belly. She wanted to reach out and touch him. Wanted to trace her fingers along the inside of his wrist so that she could feel the warmth of his skin against hers. Cosima didn't know what to do with herself. It may have seemed as natural as breathing sitting with Tristan and exchanging funny stories over crab cakes and drinks, but Cosima had to accept that she didn't really know this man. He was virtually a stranger, even though she knew his favorite color was burgundy and that he always bribed his daughter with another snack so he could have the pink Starbursts. It didn't matter that she knew he constantly dreamed of flying and falling and once spent hours looking up dream dictionaries searching for what his subconscious was trying to tell him before he gave up and decided to enjoy the ride.

Cosima didn't want the night to end. She couldn't remember the last time she felt as intrigued by, taken with, or attracted to a man, and it was disappointing that the circumstances that threw them together meant she probably wouldn't see him again after leaving the restaurant.

The thought that this might just be a one-time moment of serendipity had Cosima reaching for the menu even though she was too full to take another bite. She moved back and forth between a brownie and a cheesecake until Jules sauntered over to the table with a knowing smile on her face and asked, “Are you guys still going? Is there anything I can get for you?”

Tristan looked up at Jules with that smile that did the weirdest things to Cosima’s insides and said, “I think I want to get a Spiked Hot Chocolate.”

Cosima raised an eyebrow.

“Tristan came in here a couple weeks ago and wanted a hot chocolate with a little something extra,” Jules explained. “My uncle Roger added a bit of whiskey, and he’s been having it instead of dessert ever since.”

“I think I might give that a try.”

The conversation didn’t flow as easily as it did before Jules had come by. Something was building in the pit of Cosima’s stomach that made it just a little bit harder to laugh at Tristan’s jokes, just a little bit harder to return his banter, just a little bit harder to concentrate.

It was wild how much their night together felt like a first date that was going very, very well. Cosima might have been off the dating market for damn near a decade, but she knew that the easy way between them wasn’t the norm.

“Everything okay?”

His quiet question pulled her out of her thoughts. Cosima smiled at him. “I’m just thinking that the last thing I expected when I came here this evening was this...”

He chuckled. “A weird man invading your space and forcing you to put away the book you planned to read.”

“The first person who has heard my idea about how I plan to spend Christmas and didn’t immediately assume there was something wrong with me.”

“That would’ve been hard to do since I’m doing the exact same thing, just with better movies.”

Cosima placed her hand to her chest and faked offense. “You take that back.”

“I refuse,” he said with a huge grin. He leaned towards Cosima, giving her a whiff of his cologne. She squeezed her thighs together, so her reaction to him didn’t show on her face. “You’re going to be watching *Home Alone*, but *This Christmas* didn’t make the list. *Last Holiday? The Preacher’s Wife?* Ma’am, you didn’t even consider *Die Hard*.”

Cosima had been taking a sip of the hot chocolate Jules returned with and almost spat it back out. “*Die Hard?* Be for real, Tristan.”

His smile widened, revealing the two dimples Cosima kept looking forward to seeing since they made their first appearance earlier in the conversation. “How much realer can I be? *Die Hard* is more Christmassy than the first *Home Alone* movie ever was; in this essay, I will...”

That pulled a deep belly laugh from Cosima. The man was so effortlessly funny that she couldn’t help but be endeared even if he wasn’t making any sense.

“It is not.”

“One day, you’ll see the light,” he teased. “People are always resistant at first, but once I start dropping facts on them, they’ve got no choice but to accept the truth.”

“Oh, really?” Cosima challenged. “What facts?”

He started answering but was interrupted by his phone going off again. He looked at the screen and sighed before signaling Cosima to hold on.

“Mother,” he said, voice serious even though there was still a wide-ass smile on his face. “I know your husband already relayed my position. You’re not going to change my mind.”

He listened to whatever his mother was saying on the other end while Cosima sipped her hot chocolate. The whiskey warmed her, but it didn’t hold a candle to the way her body seemed to melt for Tristan.

Calm down, girl. You've known him for all of ten seconds.

"It just so happens I will not be spending Christmas alone," she heard Tristan say. The comment immediately brought her attention back to him, and she stared at him in confusion. "I'm going to be spending that day convincing my friend *Die Hard* is the ultimate Christmas movie."

She could tell by the increase in volume and pitch coming from his phone, even though she couldn't quite make out what was being said, that his mother wasn't falling for it.

"I'm being honest," he said, eyes meeting Cosima's. She could see the mischief sparkling there as he continued, "She's right here with me. Wanna speak to her?"

"Absolutely not," Cosima mouthed, but he was already thrusting the phone in her direction.

"Tristan, stop toying with me," his mother was saying when Cosima put the phone to her ear.

"He isn't, actually," she said, stunning the woman into silence. "We were just having an argument about whether it was more Christmassy than *Home Alone*. I'm afraid you've raised an odd one, Mrs. Jackson."

"How did he put you up to this?" his mother asked, the skepticism still clear in her voice.

"He didn't," Cosima lied. "I promise."

She crossed her index and middle fingers the same way she used to do as a child when she lied.

"That's good to know."

There was so much relief, warmth, and genuine happiness in her voice at the thought her son wasn't spending Christmas alone despite not knowing who the hell Cosima was that she couldn't help the guilt that settled in her stomach at the thought of deceiving her. Tristan had told her that he was his parents' surprise baby and that his mother had the hugest soft spot for him. It was plain to hear in her voice when she said, "I'm happy to hear he found something to do with himself, even if it's watching that God-awful movie. I was sure he'd

spend the entire day moping about Nia, although he made the right decision. I'll have an easier Christmas now I know he won't be alone. I won't even ask any questions about you two until after New Year's. Just be sure to tell TJ I'm looking forward to the Christmas photos. Don't let him get away without making you his special cheesecake."

Then she was gone before Cosima could formulate a response. She stared at the phone as if it'd grown two heads before passing it back to Tristan with a shake of her head. "I can't believe you made me an accomplice in lying to that sweet woman."

Cosima was so busy trying to ignore the way her body reacted to the slightest touch of his fingers against hers as he took the phone she offered back to him that she almost missed it when he said, "It doesn't have to be a lie."

She took a huge gulp of her hot chocolate so she could buy some time and not make a spectacle of herself trying to respond while butterflies waged war in her stomach. Perhaps there was more whiskey in the hot chocolate than she'd anticipated because nothing else could explain what got into her head when she asked, "Are you asking me, a woman you just met, to spend Christmas with you?"

"No."

Cosima's stomach dropped so quickly she felt dizzy.

"I'm asking you to spend Christmas Eve with me too."

Chapter 6

Tristan

Tristan showed up at Cosima's building the next day at their agreed time of ten in the morning, half-expecting she wouldn't answer when he called. There was a small voice in the back of his head that whispered there was no way she wouldn't change her mind. Hell, that small voice was the *reasonable* part of his brain. He hadn't given much thought to any of his actions since sitting at Cosima's table the night before. He'd been acting off instinct ever since.

Tristan didn't believe in coincidences, and there were too many factors at play for him to do anything other than shoot his shot, regardless of where it landed. Still, he half-worried that Cosima might wake up in the light of morning and decide she had made a rash decision. He would have understood if she did. Because who the hell spent a major holiday with someone they'd met less than twenty-four hours before? It didn't matter that he and Cosima continued chatting until the restaurant closed or that he insisted on seeing to it she made it home safe and lingered outside her building, resisting the urge to kiss her goodbye. Their time together might have felt like a first date, but it definitely was not. The last thing he wanted to do was give her the impression he expected anything to happen between them. He just wanted to see where things could lead because they deserved that. The way his entire being went a little soft when he listened to the excitement in her voice as she described being able to quit her corporate job to go into editing full-time deserved more exploration. The way the flash of determination in those soulful brown eyes landed straight in his gut when she accepted his challenge to

go ice skating deserved more exploration. The way his groin tightened when she licked away an errant bit of whipped cream from her lips after she downed her final spiked hot chocolate deserved more exploration. Tristan was determined to explore not only the budding attraction between them but the first gentle stirrings of tenderness as much as he could over the next two days without coming on too strong.

He didn't realize just how anxious he was about Cosima changing her mind until she answered the phone and let him know she'd be right down to meet him.

He went from standing stiffly to leaning against the wall right outside her building's door as he waited for her to come down. He didn't have to wait long before the doors opened, and she came breezing out, the coconut scent he'd already started associating with her trailing behind her.

"Hey," she said when she finally clocked him standing there. She stepped forward and hesitated a little bit before she allowed herself to be pulled into an embrace. Tristan wished he'd met her in the middle of summer when he wouldn't have to contend with layers of clothing between them now he finally had her in his arms. He took in Cosima's thick leggings, thigh-high boots, and the cream sweater he could see under the unzipped puffy coat she wore. He couldn't look away from her. She looked good as hell, and he spent a few seconds ensuring she knew this.

The shy smile that blossomed on her face at his effusive compliments hit Tristan somewhere behind his ribcage.

"Thank you," she replied. "Let's see what you think after you have to peel my ass off the ice once I start falling at the rink."

Tristan cleared his throat, hating the fact that the innocent comment drew his attention to her ass as she sashayed in front of him in the direction of her building's parking space. He ignored the way his lower belly burned, an acknowledgment that he wouldn't mind handling her ass in any way she'd allow.

“I got us some hot chocolates,” he said once they’d settled into his SUV. She grinned hard as she reached out for the takeaway cup he offered.

“Thank God. I was about to ask you to swing by somewhere. I love cold days, but I need a few hot drinks to get my day started.”

He pulled a tiny bottle of whiskey from his pocket and handed it to her with an exaggerated flourish. “For old times’ sake.”

She chuckled. “Not us already having a signature drink. Be sure to let your mother know for when she invariably starts planning the wedding.”

He loved that she felt comfortable enough to make a joke that had the potential to land awkwardly. “Speaking of my mother, she called me at an ungodly hour this morning to demand the very answers you told me she said she’d wait until after New Year’s to get to.”

Cosima poured half of the bottle of whiskey into her hot chocolate before offering him the rest. Tristan shook his head, “Save mine for when we get to the rink.”

Cosima tucked the the bottle into her handbag before turning her attention back to the conversation at hand.

“What did you tell her?”

“The truth.”

Her eyes widened. “Stop. You’re lying. You went through all of that to fold like laundry once she started asking questions?”

“I know you didn’t say *fold like laundry*,” he laughed.

“What? Do you prefer origami?”

“Look,” Tristan said, almost choking on his laughter, “leave me alone.”

“Okay, okay. But how did she react to you lying to her?”

He glanced toward her as he shifted the car into gear and pulled out of the parking space. “I think she was too pleased

with me thanking her for being the best wingwoman to ever exist.”

He loved how expressive her face was as it took her a few seconds to work out what he meant.

“You would’ve asked me to spend Christmas with you regardless?”

“I was going to try my damn best. My mother just helped ease it along.”

“What did she say when she found out you only met me last night?”

Tristan drove in silence for a bit, trying to work out what was *too* much to say. He wasn’t trying to scare Cosima off or make the rest of the day awkward. When he pulled up to a red light, he couldn’t help but reflect on the excited notes in his mother’s voice as she marveled about how everything in life had a way of lining up the way it should. He thought of holding it back but found himself telling Cosima, “She thinks it might be kismet.”

Something softened in those expressive honey-brown eyes. “Do you believe in kismet?”

He locked eyes with her long enough that the car behind them got irritated and started to blow the horn when he didn’t pull off as soon as the light turned green. “Let’s just say the Universe has got my attention.”

Chapter 7

Cosima

Cosima couldn't get Tristan's comment out of her mind. It wasn't just *what* he said that made her skin go warm and caused electric currents to flow through her blood. It was *how* he said it. His deep voice went a little bit deeper and dropped soft enough to feel like a caress while he held her gaze, so she saw the sincerity reflected in his eyes.

Cosima agreed with him. She wasn't sure how she felt about kismet or fate or any of that, but it was hard for her to fight the small seed of certainty in her gut that this was the start of something that, though she couldn't quite place, she knew she needed.

The skating rink was in a perfectly ordinary building Cosima had driven past many times before without an inkling of what was inside. Tristan explained that the facility offered year-round ice skating classes, and a few of the kids coached there had gone on to regional competitions.

"Lorraine and I are thinking of seeing how Nia feels about it next year, so I came to check it out, and that's when I realized they had this big Christmas Eve thing each year,"

he explained as he paid for the tickets and secured their entry bands before leading her, with his hand against the small of her back, toward the double doors that led to the rink.

"Oh," she breathed once she stepped inside. It was like stepping into a winter wonderland. The lights were dimmed, which showed off the many strands of Christmas lights nestled within garlands and wrapped around the edges of the rink

beautifully. A large Christmas tree loomed in the middle of the rink, decorated in red and green baubles and poinsettias with a large sparkling star sitting at the top.

She chuckled as she observed families skating with little children pushing on penguins and polar bears to help keep them upright.

“This is amazing,” she whispered. “The place even smells like Christmas. How did they do that?”

“I’m willing to bet Glade plugins in every available outlet, but who knows?” Tristan teased, holding her elbow and directing her to where they could get fitted for skating boots. The nerves started to set in then. She was definitely going to bust her ass if she attempted to go skating. Cosima looked up at Tristan, ready to ask if they could watch families skate from the sidelines and found him smiling at her. Amusement sparkled in his eyes as if he had been patiently waiting for her to try to back out, but there was also something else that caused shivers to slide down her spine. He was looking at her like he’d just stumbled across the most exquisite puzzle that he couldn’t wait to solve. Cosima had never had anyone look at her like that. She’d seen fondness in people’s eyes, lust even, but she had never had anyone look at her with wonder...like they believed she was made up of magic and stardust and were happy just to experience her. Her words caught in her throat, so she tried to clear them away with a small cough, hoping it would help shake away the feelings crashing over her.

“Everything ok?”

She leaned into the small bubble of happiness expanding in her chest and realized despite her being scared as heck that she might fall on her ass, everything *was* okay.

“I think I’m going to have to wrestle one of those penguins away from a six-year-old,” she said instead. “I hope you took me seriously when I tried to tell you I’m gravitationally challenged.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ve got you.”

She flashed him a look filled with skepticism but laced her fingers in his outstretched hand anyway, allowing him to try to lead her to the rink. Except, Cosima wasn't prepared for how much of a struggle it was to cross the small distance from the shoe exchange spot to the ice. She could tell Tristan hadn't been prepared either for how many times he had to grab her arms to prevent her from toppling forward, backward, or straight into him as she tried and failed to keep her balance. It wasn't much better on the ice. They moved at such a slow pace the little kids sped around them with the little stabilization animals Cosima was starting to get jealous of.

Tristan pulled her close, and in those few seconds, Cosima didn't mind that she felt like she was always half a second away from seriously injuring herself on the ice. It felt so good being wrapped up in his arms that she found it easy to release the tension she was feeling and relax in his embrace.

"I'm going to release you just a little bit," he said, trying but failing to keep the amusement from his voice. "Just try to stay upright."

"Don't be funny, Tristan," she shot back without heat but almost toppled over once he released his grip so he could dig into his pockets for his phone and headphones. He stuck one of the headphones into her ear and popped the other into his.

"I expected their tracklist to be pretty corny, so I did my own playlist," he said. "I had to upgrade it a little since my date is no longer four and obsessed with Disney, but I promise it's fire."

Cosima turned her attention to the random lo-fi music playing in the rink. It contained enough jingles and jangles to get the point across that it was meant to be Christmas music, but Tristan hadn't told any lies. For as much effort as they put into the majestic décor, the music was absolute trash.

"Let me see what you got," she said. Tristan made a show of pressing the play button, causing Stevie Wonder's voice to float into her ear, singing about how Christmas meant candles burning low and choirs singing carols outside his door. They swayed together, moving slowly in part because of her

awkwardness but also because Tristan seemed to be in no hurry, as if he wanted to savor the moment of them so close together, swaying slowly with Stevie Wonder in their ears, locked in their own private world while the chaos of little kids, their families, and their winter animals existed just on the outside, unable to break through the bubble they created.

She laughed out loud, pushing against his chest when the playlist skipped ahead to the next song, and DMX's gruff voice came through the speaker.

"This should've been the first song," she teased. "It's undoubtedly the best version of 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.'"

Cosima gripped Tristan's hand tightly, resisting his attempts to lengthen their strides as he tried to move them toward the Christmas tree.

"I know that's right. I guess if I put the unfortunate mess with *Home Alone* to one side, you might actually have taste."

She wanted to keep up the playful banter, but all that came out of her mouth was a small, high-pitched laugh that had her clapping her hand over her mouth with embarrassment. Cosima refused to believe she was being *giddy* over this man she'd just met yesterday. But there was no denying it when they finally got close enough to the Christmas tree, and he pulled out his phone.

"I'd say I want us to take a selfie for me to send to my mother, but that would be a lie," he joked. "I just want to keep this memory close."

He leaned his head to the top of hers, extending his arm out and telling her to smile before he took a few snaps.

"Let me take one of y'all."

The woman, who was bundled up in a deep purple coat, beckoned to Tristan for his phone. He slowly relinquished it to her, taking care to ensure he was offering enough support to keep Cosima standing upright. She found it ironic, really, that his steady support was keeping her from falling flat on the ice, but his actions were making everything inside her body and

soul so soft and light that she marveled at the fact she didn't float right out of the rink.

Tristan held her around the waist, pulling her flush against his body as the woman took a few photos.

"I know there isn't a mistletoe, but I've got to get y'all kissing for the camera," the woman said with a wide smile. "You two are just adorable together."

Cosima froze. She knew the woman only meant well, but she was bringing an awkward dynamic into a date that was going surprisingly well. She turned to let Tristan know they didn't need to kiss just because the woman thought it would be a good photo setup when she caught him looking at her in a way that had her lifting her chin as he lowered his head and caught her lips with his. The kiss was soft and lingering, and Cosima allowed herself to relish the feel of his mouth moving slowly and deliberately over hers. She parted her lips to urge him to deepen the kiss when she suddenly remembered where they were and pulled abruptly away. She started to worry that she'd made things awkward with how quickly she pulled away, but Tristan's eyes were full of understanding as he kissed her forehead and whispered, "Later."

Her nerves were fraught with anticipation as she took in what he said. "I'll hold you to it."

Chapter 8

Tristan

It was as if the Universe conspired for them to have a perfect day, from the rink not being crowded so they never felt pressured to move too quickly to Cosima enjoying the hell out of his Christmas playlist to the older woman setting the scene for their first kiss.

Tristan still smiled even though a few hours had passed when he thought of the small flash of panic in Cosima's eyes before she eventually leaned in for the kiss. And God, he was happy she did. Her lips were so exquisitely soft, her body so pliant that Tristan almost lost track of himself and where they were. When she parted her lips and sighed into his mouth, Tristan's hands shot to the back of her head, desperate to deepen the kiss. His tongue teased the inseam of her bottom lip, and he was just about to delve into her sweetness when she pulled away abruptly, the flashing in her eyes letting him know she had been just as close to losing all sense of awareness as he was. He brought his lips to her forehead, willing his body to calm down.

"Later," he whispered, needing her to know that he couldn't wait to properly explore the chemistry between them.

When she smiled and let him know she would hold him to that promise, Tristan wanted to end the skating date immediately so that later could come expeditiously, but he shut down the impulse.

He was still trying to shut down the impulse now as he watched her sashay into the lobby of her apartment.

“I can’t believe you’ve waited until the last minute to set up your tree,” he said, trying his best to keep his attention off her ass as she moved in front of him.

“Wait until you realize I don’t have any decorations,” she shot over her shoulder before turning so he could see her megawatt smile. Tristan groaned. They had agreed to split the days evenly, with Tristan choosing the first Christmas Eve activity and Cosima deciding what they would do later in the day. He’d spent the entire drive back to her apartment trying to figure out what she wanted to do, and he didn’t even come close to setting up her Christmas tree. When he expressed shock that this would be the activity she chose, Cosima suggested that it would be a character-building exercise for him because he’d never decorated a Christmas tree. Growing up, he’d always stayed holed up in his room while his family decorated the tree, managing only to come out to steal the sugar cookies his mother always baked. Lorraine loved minimalist Christmas trees, so the trees during their marriage weren’t decorated with much more than string lights. This year he didn’t want his lack of experience to prevent Nia from having a tree she would hopefully talk about for years to come, so he’d hired a professional company to decorate the tree and his entire living area in pinks, purples, and silvers.

“Wait,” he said, coming to stand next to Cosima as they waited on the elevator she’d just called. “You didn’t tell me anything about having to get decorations. It’s chaos out there.”

Tristan couldn’t believe it when Cosima smiled again, her energy surrounding her like a halo. “That’s the most exciting part.”

“Under all of that cuteness, you’re a bit of a weirdo,” he commented, but he couldn’t keep the awe from his voice.

“What I’m hearing is that I’m cute,” she responded. “And you can’t back out of our deal.”

He wanted to tell her that he would’ve trekked with her through the hellscape that was last-minute Christmas shopping even if they hadn’t previously agreed on it because her happy

excitement was a beauty to behold. Instead, he followed her into an apartment that was as warm and inviting as she was.

“I’d give you a tour, but there’s not much to see,” she said, turning to point at a large cardboard box on her cream carpet next to her couch.

“I haven’t even unboxed it yet,” she informed him, shrugging off her thick winter coat and granting Tristan the sight he’d been waiting for all day with her in her cream sweater with thick, black leggings. He’d called her cute earlier, but that was an insufficient way to describe Cosima. Almost insulting now that he thought of just how much everything about her screamed grown woman.

“What?” she asked, forcing Tristan to pull his thoughts away from wondering how she would feel in his arms, how she would respond to his fingertips tracing lines across her skin, creating a path for his lips to follow.

“I can’t pull my eyes away from you,” he answered honestly, holding her gaze until she cleared her throat and averted her eyes.

“Well, I hope you can pull them off long enough to help me with this tree.”

He joined her in hanging up his coat on the ornate coat stand positioned close to her front door before settling down to open the box and retrieve the different parts of the tree. She wandered off and returned a few minutes later with two steaming cups of coffee, placing them on the side table closest to him.

“I don’t have hot chocolate, but these will have to do. We’re going to need the energy to fight off the hordes later.”

“I can’t believe you’re so excited about this...”

Cosima’s response was cut off by the blaring of her phone. She raised an index finger and mouthed she would be back before disappearing into the kitchen to take the call. He sat on the couch, scrolling through his phone, stopping to listen to an adorable voice note Lorraine had Nia send where his daughter chatted excitedly about her first time in the ocean. Lorraine

followed it up with a few photos of her playing at the beach, and Tristan couldn't stop the smile from spreading across his face. There was nothing that made him happier than seeing his baby happy. He was still looking at the photos observing how Nia smiled so widely that her eyes narrowed into little slits when Cosima returned holding a package in her hand.

“This got delivered just before I was getting ready to leave today, and now my friend, Navi, is on the phone demanding that I open it right this moment,” she said, ripping the box open to pull out a smaller white package. Tristan was barely able to catch more than a flash of pink before Cosima was trying to shove it back into the larger brown box it was shipped in. She must have caught the confused look on his face because she instantly let out a nervous chuckle and said, “I don't think Navaya expected me to have company when I opened it.”

“Oh?” he asked, smirking as he got up from the couch and crossed the space between them. He perched on the back of the armchair where she was sitting. “All that did was pique my interest, to be honest.”

For a few seconds, he thought she wouldn't satisfy his curiosity, but eventually, she pulled the thing she'd been so desperate to hide out of the box and handed it to Tristan.

“Sex toys for everyone,” he read aloud, looking at the bright pink depiction of a U-shaped toy against the white box.

Cosima scrunched her nose. “Navaya has been threatening to buy me one of these for ages now since I showed a little bit too much interest in how often she and her husband use these in public, but she had to wait until I was single to actually do it.”

There was a lot to process in that sentence. Tristan handed her back the box and asked, “Run that by me again?”

So, she did. Cosima explained the Bluetooth-activated toy that allowed a partner to control the pleasure of the person currently wearing it. He continued sipping his coffee, trying his hardest not to let on how much he knew that this was something Cosima wanted to try out so badly her friend

decided to buy it for her for Christmas affected him. He couldn't believe the chain of events that led to him being here with Cosima in her living room, watching her shy smile as she tried to justify her curiosity. The chain of events that led to him throwing out all sense of taking things slowly when he said, "Your ex being out of the picture doesn't mean you can't use it."

"I know I can use it on my own," Cosima responded. The *no shit, Sherlock* was strong in her tone. "The whole point is the surprise. I'll hardly be surprised if I'm controlling it."

He smiled at her then, slowly pulling his bottom lip through his teeth before he said, "I wasn't suggesting that you control anything."

"Oh," she whispered, undoubtedly still turning his comment over in her mind. Watching his insinuation dawn on Cosima was a sight to behold as her eyes widened, and she breathed deeply with so many emotions flashing across her beautifully expressive face as she repeated, voice soft and shaky, "Oh."

Chapter 9

Cosima

Cosima splashed warm water over her face and stared at her reflection in her bathroom mirror. She thought it might help calm her nerves, but it did nothing, so she tried splashing water again.

“Am I really about to do this?” she asked herself for what felt like the hundredth time since Tristan posed his question, and she agreed to wear the *Lovense Dolce* while they went shopping for Christmas tree décor.

There had been numerous opportunities for Cosima to back out of their agreement.

She could've changed her mind while she set the sex toy to charge before they chose the best spot in the living room to put up the tree.

She could've backed out while Tristan went through the process of downloading the app to his phone and setting up the Bluetooth connection.

She could've let him know she was no longer interested when he tested it out by wrapping one of the bulbous heads of the toy in his hand and turning it on before exclaiming, “I can feel this all the way down to my elbow.”

Yes, *that* might have been the time to pull the plug, but Cosima didn't. She didn't because the only thing that had changed between when she opened Navaya's gift and now as she stood in her bathroom, having sanitized the toy and inserting it so that one end nestled inside her and the other

rested against her clit, was that she was buzzing with anticipation.

She changed into dark jeans, deciding it was better not to risk any accidents by only wearing leggings, and her knee-high boots. She found Tristan staring intently at his phone when she returned to the living room a few minutes later. He glanced up almost as soon as she came into the room, like he sensed her presence.

“Nervous?” he asked.

Cosima nodded. “As hell. It’s wild that I’m trusting you with something like this.”

“You’re safe with me.”

His voice was filled with such earnestness that Cosima almost laughed. She’d agreed to this little side mission during their Christmas tree decoration expedition easily because she couldn’t see any reality where her Christmas didn’t end with Tristan buried deep inside her.

“Just don’t have me embarrassing myself out in public,” she said, hoping he could hear the smallest bit of panic that was an undercurrent to the teasing notes of her voice.

“We don’t have to do this if you don’t feel comfortable,” he said. “But I wouldn’t have you out there embarrassing yourself... I know you haven’t already forgotten how I almost broke both legs and my left hand keeping you upright when gravity really started kicking your ass during the last couple minutes at the rink.”

“Now you’re just telling tales,” she protested, even though she could recall the panic she felt when she got a bit too into a replay of DMX’s “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and started to slip on the ice. The only thing that stood between her and the fall was Tristan’s quick reflexes. Not wanting to admit that he was right, she returned the conversation to where it had started. “I’m ready. Let’s do it! I mean, how bad could it be?”

* * *

It was horrible.

But in the most delicious way possible. Cosima felt like she'd been on the edge of an orgasm for hours while Tristan refused to grant her reprieve. That shit was frustrating as hell, but it felt so, so good.

Tristan had been so slow in starting the vibrator that Cosima began to worry that he was nervous as well. She'd spent the first part of the trip browsing the Christmas décor section of the closest Target on high alert, stealing glances every few moments to keep track of what Tristan was doing with his phone. It was only when she noticed the little smile on his face whenever he caught her looking around frantically that she realized he was intentionally delaying the process to work on her nerves.

Tristan walked the aisle with her and gave her his full attention as they tried to find things that matched the white, silver, and blue theme she'd decided on.

Cosima felt the first soft pulsations against her clit while she was looking at snowflake ornaments and almost let out a squeak when she felt the power of the vibrations slowly building. She took a deep breath, paying even keener attention to the decorations on display, trying to pretend to be unaffected even though the steady pleasure had begun to send delicious tingles to the rest of her body, and her heart rate was slowly picking up. She placed the few pieces she chose into the cart and turned around to flash Tristan a smile, feeling proud of how normal she was acting even though she was careening towards an orgasm.

And then it stopped.

"I think I saw lights down this way," Tristan said, holding his hand out for her as if he hadn't been in control of the pleasurable sensations that her body was already agitated to be deprived of.

It took her a few seconds to properly orient herself and follow him to where he was pointing out baubles matching the shades she'd shown him from her Pinterest board, then while they grabbed hot chocolate before they started shopping in

earnest. Cosima was calculating how many baubles would be too many when the vibrations started deep inside her. This time Tristan didn't work up to it. They hit her strong and deep, and she immediately clenched around the vibrator.

"Shit," she murmured, reaching out to grab the cart to steady herself as the throbbing continued, the pattern changing like a wave until Cosima had to take deep, intentional breaths to keep herself from moaning out loud. Each time she thought she could anticipate the pattern, Tristan did something to throw her off, but it felt so good...so damn good...that Cosima couldn't even be self-conscious about the fact she was just standing frozen in the middle of an aisle instead of grabbing items off shelves the way everyone else in the store seemed to be doing. He settled into a steady rhythm, which allowed Cosima to eventually throw some baubles into her cart. She turned her attention from the cart and spotted Tristan standing a little further down the aisle, staring at her while he traced a pattern on his phone's screen with his thumb. She shivered as the exact pattern vibrated against her clit. Cosima expected to see glee on his face at the way he was obviously affecting her, but that was not what she saw there. There was a hunger in his eyes and in his stance that had her clenching her thighs together for another reason entirely. Cosima knew in that moment that it didn't matter how good it felt playing this game with Tristan while people milled around them, too concerned about last-minute shopping to pay any attention to her standing there wet as fuck, legs weak and on the verge of an orgasm that she was certain would take her out. Being with Tristan, *really being* with him, was going to be so much better. Just trying to imagine how Tristan would be in bed bumped her a bit closer to the orgasm she edged toward, and she nearly buckled when he increased the vibrations while he slowly walked to her. His hands came to her waist, steadying her as he leaned down so that his lips brushed against the shell of her ear when he said, "Let's finish up the shopping, Cosima. I need to get you back home so I can use this the way I really want to."

Chapter 10

Tristan

Cosima laid out all the Christmas tree décor they'd managed to pull together from the three stores they went to before eventually making it back to her apartment. He'd given controlling the toy a rest as they finished their shopping because he hadn't been exaggerating when he pleaded with her to hurry up so they could leave.

Tristan knew that watching Cosima shop, knowing he held the power to make her shake from pleasure, would be a turn-on, but he hadn't anticipated how much. By the time they'd made it back to her apartment, he was hard and aching. She hummed to herself as she sorted baubles, ornaments, and fabric into piles, and Tristan couldn't help but take her in. He couldn't believe that he was here with a woman he had just met but felt like a summer rain against his soul. She was so into separating the décor that she didn't notice him pull his phone from his pocket. He opened the app and contemplated for a few seconds about how he wanted to play his hand. He could've gone for shock and awe, but he decided against it, even though he no longer had to exercise the kind of patience he had while they were in the store. He started off with the least powerful vibrations on the end of the toy cocooned where his dick was dying to be, smiling a little when Cosima's humming abruptly stopped. She turned her head and caught his gaze. Tristan hoped she could see the message that was plain in his eyes: *game on*.

Her eyes widened a bit, and the garland she'd been holding slipped through her fingers when he increased the level of the

vibrations before turning on the clitoral stimulator at its highest intensity.

She gasped.

Tristan got harder.

He shifted on the couch as he continued adjusting the settings until he was satisfied he was delivering the sweetest onslaught of pleasure to Cosima. She'd given up trying to stand and sank down onto the plush carpet, and that affected him in ways he couldn't quite put his finger on. He pushed himself up from the couch and crossed the small distance between them, dropped to his knees beside her, and brought his palm to her cheek.

Tristan brushed his thumb against her quivering lips and whispered, "How are we doing, baby?"

She started to respond but cut herself short with a sharp intake of breath followed by a shaky release. Tristan wanted to switch up the rhythm of the vibrations but knew better than that. The rise and fall of her chest, the way her eyes could barely focus, and how she kept digging her fingers into the carpet let him know she had to be close and changing the rhythm would just throw her off. He'd teased her enough all afternoon, and Tristan was ready to see the faces she made as she fell apart. He left the settings as they were, coaxing Cosima to lie on her back. He lay on his side beside her, fighting the urge to slide his hand under her sweater so he could feel the warmth of her skin. His dick twitched, reminding him that Cosima wasn't the only one being slowly tortured, but he couldn't stop taking her in — each jerk of her body, the way tears crested in the corners of her eyes, the little moans she couldn't fight escaping her mouth.

"Tristan," she whispered softly. "Please."

He was undone.

"More?"

She nodded sharply, and he navigated to the app so he could increase both sets of vibrations. He was rewarded with a shaky sigh, and Tristan couldn't stop himself from capturing

her small moan in his own mouth as he leaned over and kissed her. If he'd expected another gentle kiss, Tristan would have been surprised by the way Cosima attacked his mouth, tongue lashing instantly against his, lips pressed hard until she couldn't keep kissing him any longer. He could feel the deep shaking in her body even as she tossed her head back and let out a small keening cry that went straight to his dick. He let her ride the wave of her orgasm until she begged him to make it stop. She pulled herself into a sitting position slowly and gingerly once he turned everything off and shot him a shaky smile. Tristan kissed her softly before bringing his lips to her forehead, wishing they could lie there a bit longer but knowing there were so many things left to do. He pushed himself to stand and reached out to her, pulling her to her feet, then hooked his hand behind her thighs so he could lift her. She squealed in surprised delight as he brought her to her couch.

“Gather your strength,” he teased. “Somebody said decorating a tree is a mandatory Christmas activity, and it takes work.”

“Give me a few minutes,” she said with a small grin. “I need to recover.”

“Let me run to the bathroom while you do that.”

Then before he could stop himself, Tristan leaned in and kissed her forehead again. Damn. Could he really be that far gone over someone he'd almost literally just met?

He accepted that the answer was a resounding yes when he stood in her apartment's bathroom, unable to get comfortable no matter how many times he tried to adjust himself. He stood there for a few seconds before coming to terms with the fact he needed to find some way to relieve himself if he was going to be able to go back out there and help decorate a damn tree.

He felt like a damn pervert skulking around Cosima's medicine cabinet before he found some lotion that wouldn't leave his dick smelling like he'd gotten lost in Bath & Body Works. He let the embarrassment fade away as he wrapped his hand around his dick, moving from the base to his tip, squeezing with enough friction to force a tiny groan from his

mouth as he called to memory the way Cosima's body tensed and shook as the orgasm rolled over her. He stroked again, squeezing his head lightly as he recalled her quivering lips and the little moans she made. The strokes became harder, firmer as he tried to imagine how her pussy would feel clenching around him when he finally got to experience her. Tristan groaned, increasing his speed as he promised himself that he would pull more than those little sexy moans from her throat when it was his turn to please her. He intended to hear her scream his name until the walls shook from it when she fell apart. The thought pushed Tristan to a shuddering release that he needed a few seconds to recover from before he went about cleaning up any evidence that he'd jacked off in Cosima's bathroom to fantasies of himself buried deep inside her.

He felt satiated, but his lust was a fully awakened beast. Tristan wanted to reconsider holding off, but he knew patience was a virtue, and Cosima was going to be the best Christmas gift he ever unwrapped.

Chapter II

Cosima

The Christmas tree lights illuminated the still-dark living room as Cosima snuggled more deeply into her blanket.

She sipped at the cinnamon tea she'd brewed while the soothing sounds of Pentatonix's Christmas album lulled her into a state of calm. What a whirlwind the last day and a half had been.

Christmas morning was at once everything she expected but nothing like she had planned. She had a few hours before she was set to meet Tristan at his house for the Christmas lunch they planned to have. She'd chosen to prepare mashed potatoes, baked macaroni and cheese, basmati rice, and a salad while Tristan got stuck with baked chicken, grilled salmon, and the cheesecake his mother had warned her not to let him talk his way out of.

She'd prepped most of the food after Tristan left the night before, trying to work off the antsy energy she felt at the fact he decided to leave. Cosima had been sure he would fuck her right there on the couch when he'd returned. Instead, he waited for her to head to the bathroom and clean herself up before helping her decorate the tree. The nonstop banter they had while decorating the tree was almost enough for her to forget the disappointment she felt. When they finally stepped away from the tree with its perfectly placed blue, silver, and white ornaments and twinkling lights, the garlands that they draped over her TV console, and the blue and silver wreath she hung on her door, Cosima was very pleased. She took a few snaps to send to her mother before she headed to the kitchen and poured a glass of wine for her and a whiskey for

Tristan. She returned to the couch with the expectation they would end the night with a bang...or several bangs...but he'd just snuggled up to her, occasionally placing kisses at her temple and against her jaw while she pulled up the first *Home Alone* movie. Then he proceeded to roast her, the directors, the plot, the actors, and the setting for every second of the damn thing.

Cosima sipped her tea, not fighting the fond smile that kissed her lips when she remembered his insistence that the first and second *Home Alone* movies were just an exploration of bad parenting.

"I hope you won't have anything to say when I come at the movies you choose with the same energy," she'd teased.

"I already know how I'll deal with that," he'd said with a cheeky grin.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Tell me that *Die Hard* is trash."

"*Die Hard* is..."

Tristan cut her off by pressing her lips to his, then wrapping his hand around her waist so he could pull her onto his lap. He kissed her until she forgot how they got there in the first place. She kissed him even harder when she started to feel the evidence of how much he wanted her pressed against her stomach, but when she grabbed his hand to guide it under her sweater, desperate to feel his fingertips against her skin, he broke the kiss. "You have no idea how badly I want you right now."

His dick twitched in his jeans on cue, and both Tristan and Cosima laughed when he amended. "Maybe you do. But I need to pull back on this because I want to be able to savor you our first time together, and I still need to pick things up from the grocery store for our Christmas lunch."

He hadn't given her a chance to protest. Instead, he eased her off his lap and continued trolling the movie as if she wasn't almost combusting with lust while she sat beside him.

Cosima's ringtone pulled her out of her reverie.

“Merry Christmas, Simmy,” her mother’s cheerful voice came through the line, making her smile fondly. She could just imagine how much her father had to do to convince Dorothy to wait until a reasonable time to call Cosima. Not that five a.m. was reasonable under any circumstance.

“Merry Christmas, Ma. And you too, Daddy, because I know you’re listening in.”

The rumble of her father’s deep laughter sounded through the phone.

“Just want to make sure you’re okay,” Dorothy said.

“I’m great. I’m just here having a cup of tea and listening to music while I get my dishes ready.”

“You’re cooking? That’s a lot of effort to be by yourself.”

She contemplated playing it off but decided to take a page out of Tristan’s book and just tell her mother the truth. “I won’t be alone. I’m spending Christmas with a friend. We hung out yesterday too.”

“What have you been doing?” her mother asked at the same time her father exclaimed, “What friend?”

“We went ice skating yesterday, and that was fun,” Cosima said, deciding that was infinitely better for her mother to hear than Tristan having her on her living room carpet acting like she had a leading role in *The Exorcist*.

“I’m so happy to know you won’t be alone today,” her mother said. Cosima heard the same undercurrent of relief that had been in Tristan’s mother’s voice, and she couldn’t help but chuckle. Those two would get on well together. She waited to feel bad for getting too ahead of herself even thinking about her and Tristan’s parents meeting, but that didn’t come. Instead, the same sense of rightness that she felt when she thought of how life threw them together fell over her. Her past had taught her that things could be good until they weren’t, but Cosima couldn’t help but feel like Tristan was the answer to the short letter she’d written to Santa as an angsty fifteen-year-old, old enough to know he wasn’t real but devastated that her crush had decided he liked her cousin Tamara better. Her

request had been simple: *I want love to be easy*. Not that she was in love with Tristan...just yet. But every time he laughed, used his hands for emphasis when he told a story he found intriguing, or smiled that smile that awakened butterflies and hope inside her, Cosima could feel the foundations being built.

As much as she wanted to explore the physical chemistry between her and Tristan, she was anxious to be in his presence even more.

Cosima put her cinnamon tea on the side table and tried to rein herself in. She finished making her side dishes while the second *Home Alone* played loudly on the TV in the living room, finding herself anticipating the parts of the movie where Tristan might have inserted his sarcastic commentary.

She took her time getting ready, anticipation unfurling in her gut as she picked out the matching blue underwear set that made her feel most sexy. Then she scrubbed and oiled and moisturized the nervous energy away before putting on a red sweater dress with leggings and grabbing the Santa hat she had hanging from her bedpost. Cosima kept her makeup minimal with burgundy lipstick that she couldn't wait for Tristan to kiss away before she grabbed all her things and made it to her car.

One quick stop later, she let the disembodied voice of her GPS direct her to Tristan's house, which was located on a quiet road just about thirty minutes away. She smiled as she took in the Christmas decorations in his front yard. The man had been serious about ensuring his daughter had the most exciting Christmas experience, from the candy canes and the gingerbread house to Jack Frost and all of the Christmas lights. Cosima wondered if anyone told Tristan he might have gone a little bit overboard.

"Christmas threw up out here," she teased when he stepped out on the porch to greet her and help her with the bags. He dropped a distracted kiss against her temple as if he'd been doing it for years.

"Thank you," he responded, grinning wildly. "Wait until you see the inside."

Chapter 12

Cosima

It was Winter Wonderland meets Barbie Dream Home, and Cosima was living for the décor of Tristan's house as soon as she stepped inside. He didn't half-ass anything, she realized, and that was how Cosima ended up spending the short tour of Tristan's house with her panties getting wet.

"She's going to love this when she gets back," she said, gesturing to the tree that had so many gifts piled under it, Cosima was sure Nia would have to take refreshment breaks when she opened them. "You really went all out for her. It looks like she has a hundred gifts under the tree."

"That's my baby right there." That small, tender smile seemed reserved for conversations about his baby, and Cosima couldn't help smiling herself. Her smile widened when he reached under the tree, pulled out a box, and handed it to her. "A hundred minus two."

"You got me a gift?"

"I did the best I could with the time I had," he said, gesturing to her to open the square box in her hand. Gift wrapping paper gave way to a canvas, and Cosima couldn't stop the delighted gasp from falling from her lips. He'd painted the Northern Lights, undoubtedly because she'd spent a good twenty minutes talking about how it was on her bucket list not just to see the Northern Lights but to see them in as many locations as possible. She knew he was talented from the art she'd seen on the website he'd pulled up, but this? This threatened to make her sob. Tristan noticed the glassiness in her eyes and pulled her in for a little squeeze. "Please don't

cry. That's the exact opposite of what I set out to achieve today. I didn't have a lot of time, so it's smaller than I wanted, but I promise to make you a larger canvas someday."

And as if he attempted to distract her, he handed her a smaller package.

A hundred minus two.

This gift was the size of a postcard, and she flashed him a shaky smile, sniffing as she took in the crossword puzzle he'd painted, which highlighted only three words: beauty, grace, badassery.

"These are the most beautiful and thoughtful gifts I've gotten in a long time," she said, wiping the tears that still insisted on coming. "I can't believe you stayed up all night painting for me."

His smile was shy. "Well, not *all night*. They were simple enough to execute, and acrylic dries a lot more quickly than most people think."

"Please stop trying to downplay what you've done," she sniffed. "My gift is silly by comparison."

"I doubt it."

Cosima loved his confidence in her but seeing the two beautiful paintings he'd dragged his ass home to create while she stomped around her kitchen, annoyed that they didn't have sex, had her regretting she'd even brought up what seemed cute at the time. She couldn't take it back now, so she led him to the kitchen, where he'd put her bags down, and pulled out the haphazardly wrapped box. Tristan went through the process of shaking it in an exaggerated manner as he tried to figure out what was inside. He wasn't any closer when he finally removed the wrapping and asked, "You got me a glass jar?"

She leaned against the kitchen counter as he went through the process of opening the box she'd taped back together and allowed herself to revel in the wide, child-like smile that broke out on his face when he saw that the jar was filled with Starbursts. Pink Starbursts.

His laughter made her feel warm inside, chasing away the concerns that he might have found her gift silly.

“I don’t even want to tell you how many packs of Starbursts I had to buy to make this happen.”

He turned to her with a look she couldn’t quite comprehend as he asked, “Wait, you bought a bunch of Starbursts and picked out the pink ones?”

Cosima nodded. “I did.”

She didn’t know his smile could get wider, but it did before he let out a deep belly laugh. He rested the glass jar on the counter and pulled her into a tight hug, kissing her softly a few times before he whispered, “You’re perfect.”

“I feel like I’m missing something.” She squeaked at how tightly he still hugged her to his body.

“Babe,” he said, “they sell packs with just pink Starbursts.”

She playfully shuddered. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“I’m not,” he whispered, amusement still in his voice. “But this means so much more. Thank you. It’s perfect.”

She welcomed the soft pressure of his lips against hers, barely hiding her disappointment when he broke the kiss and lamented, “It’s going to be so hard waiting until after dinner.”

“You’re the only one trying to wait,” she said with a sly smile. “I’ve been trying to get in your pants since yesterday.”

“The food is almost ready.”

“Trust me,” Cosima replied. “The food can wait.”

She could see him considering what she was offering and realized for the first time that Tristan liked when things went to plan. She wasn’t sure why that touched a spot inside her when she thought of how much he was willing to deviate from his perfectly planned Christmas for the sake of his daughter. It made his willingness to spend Christmas with her even more endearing when she considered he was willing to risk discomfort. She rose to her toes and pressed her lips to his

again, harder this time, sighing contently when he stopped fighting it and sank into the kiss. His hand cupped the back of her neck as he pulled her into him.

There was soft sweetness in the kisses, but there was something else skirting around the edges, too...the promise of unbridled passion intense enough to set them both on fire. Cosima's stomach tightened. God, she couldn't wait. She wrapped a leg around his waist, and he rewarded her by lifting her right up off the floor, barely breaking from their kiss as he moved them clumsily toward his bedroom. He rested her down in the middle of the bed like she was something precious before lying beside her. Tristan turned her to face him so he could kiss her again.

The kisses were as slow and torturous as they were tender, and soon he was sitting up in bed so he could pull her into a seated position too. He helped her remove her sweater dress, tossing it off the bed, and kissed her softly. He traced his fingers along her jaw and then followed the path with his lips, making his way down the column of her neck before gently sucking at a spot above her collarbone. Tristan was tender, so fucking tender, and her body didn't know how to react to the beautiful paradox that this man was. He was poised to destroy her but to do it with such care that he'd put her back together again. And that was when she knew. As excited as she was about finding out if the perfection that was Tristan extended to his dick, what they were about to do would not be sex. It would not be fucking. It would be so much more, and Cosima knew her world would never be the same.

Chapter 13

Tristan

Tristan traced his fingertips across Cosima's jawline and followed the path they took with gentle kisses. He wanted to savor her. He wanted to savor them. He wanted to savor this moment that felt like it would be more than the simple satiation of a physical urge. Tristan wanted to get so close to Cosima that their hearts started beating in unison out of sheer confusion about whose arteries they were meant to be pumping blood to.

He brought his lips back to hers, kissing her fiercely as he wrapped his hand up in her ponytail so he could pull her even closer to him as teeth grazed lips and tongues lashed against each other. He helped her out of her sweater dress and threw it off the side of the bed so his hands could immediately return to caressing her skin. His fingers traced lines along her shoulders and collarbone before he cupped her breasts through the lacy deep blue bra she wore. Seeing her nipples poking against the sheer material made his dick throb against his sweatpants. Tristan kissed Cosima, lingering for a while before he pulled away and whispered, "I think I'm wearing too many clothes."

Cosima lay back on the bed, propping herself up on her elbows as she watched Tristan stand. He removed the long-sleeved white shirt he was wearing and smiled when he noticed a flicker of surprise in her eyes as she realized his body was a canvas for his art.

"Wow," she whispered, easing herself to the edge of the bed. He stepped between her open legs, sucking in a breath

when she traced the lines of the face of the jaguar that adorned most of the left side of his stomach. “This is so intricate. I can’t wait to hear the story behind all of these.”

He grinned. Tristan was incredibly proud of his ink, incredibly proud that he’d drawn each stitch of art on his body even if they had to be tattooed by someone else. He turned so she could see that the tattoos also spanned his back, and when he turned back to face her, he saw her gazing at the bulge in his sweatpants. Tristan bit his bottom lip hard enough to taste the metallic sting of blood when Cosima reached for the waistband of his sweats.

“Checking to see if I have tattoos on my legs or something?” he teased once she started easing the pants down to his thighs.

The look she flashed him was filled with heat. “Or something.”

She reached forward and wrapped her hand around his dick once it sprang free, muttering something about Audrey not telling any lies. Tristan didn’t get to question the statement before Cosima leaned in, licked the underside of his dick from the base to the tip, and then pulled him into her mouth.

Damn. This was not the way Tristan wanted their first time to go. He wanted to please her before he took any pleasure for himself. But it was hard to let Cosima know that while she was sucking his entire length as she fondled his balls with one hand and used the other to play with her breasts, which still looked tempting as fuck straining against her bra.

He didn’t know where he found the strength, but eventually, he was able to coax his dick from her mouth.

“I was just getting started,” she said, and Tristan almost lost his resolve. He hooked his fingers in the straps of the bra she wore, pulling until her breasts sprang free. She moved back on the bed, and Tristan hovered over her for a few seconds before he leaned forward and captured one of her nipples in his mouth, sucking and gently biting until she arched against him, hands coming to the back of his head so she could pull him closer. He took his fill before he finally

moved on to place kisses along her breasts and rib cage, traveling down her stomach until he got to the fabric of the blue lace panties she wore. He eased her back down on the bed so he could begin exploring her in earnest, trying hard to fight back the desperate desire to rip her panties to the side and sink his entire length inside her.

Tristan's dick hardened when the scent of her arousal hit him the closer he moved to the apex of her thighs. His breath hitched in his throat. He was on the cusp of getting everything he'd wanted for the last two days, and his body didn't know where to channel the excitement. He kept the desire to move quickly at bay and continued to tease Cosima with the softest kisses on the inside of her thighs before he grazed his lips across the already-soaked seat of her panties.

"Tristan," she moaned, trying to arch her hips toward him. "Stop playing around."

He chuckled, and he could feel her body tense at the unexpected vibration. He wanted to keep on teasing her, but Tristan didn't see the point in continuing to punish himself. He spread her legs wide, using his index finger to push the crotch of her panties aside.

"So fucking wet," he breathed as he took in the way she glistened for him. *Damn*. He rubbed his finger against her, reveling in her quickened breathing each time he brushed against her clit. He added more pressure, moving in small, tight circles before sliding another finger inside. God, he could watch her forever, lost in every shiver, every gasp, every moan, but he'd denied himself the pleasure of tasting her long enough. He quickly discarded her panties so she was spread out like a feast before him before dipping his head and covering her with his mouth. She tasted so fucking good that he couldn't hold back the moan that escaped him. Her hand flew to the back of his head as he began sucking in earnest, finding that bundle of nerves guaranteed to bring her the most pleasure. He licked at a slow, steady pace until Cosima started grinding against him. Tristan slid his hand under her ass so he could pull her pussy so hard against his face that he struggled to breathe. But breathing wasn't on his agenda. He didn't care

about anything other than feeling Cosima spasm and gush a little every time he teased her entrance with his tongue. He didn't care about anything other than how soft and plump her pussy felt under his lips. Cosima made the softest mewling sounds in her throat as she continued grinding against his face. Tristan flattened his tongue against her and allowed her to set the rhythm as his hand found his dick. He stroked to the rhythm of her pussy sliding against his tongue until he knew he was in danger of cumming all over his hand. He let Cosima use his face as her favorite playground ride for another few minutes before flipping her on her back, chuckling when she instantly arched for him.

“Good girl,” he whispered, smacking her ass. The way her cheeks jiggled under the friction of his palm had him smacking it again before he reached across to the bedside table, grateful he'd had the presence of mind to leave a few condoms out. He grabbed one and carefully ripped it open with his teeth while he slid two fingers into Cosima's pussy, pumping them in and out while he pressed his thumb against the rim of her asshole. Her moans became louder and more insistent as he increased the pressure until the digit slid a little way in.

“Oh,” she moaned.

“You like that?”

Cosima nodded her head into the bed before she caught herself and vocalized that she did. Tristan didn't need any further encouragement. He stopped fingering her long enough to sheath himself with the condom before he spread her cheeks wide and licked from her clit to the small, puckered hole. She arched her back even more when he circled the rim with his tongue, swiping over and over again as she moaned. Tristan kissed her ass cheeks, giving one a playful bite before he lifted his head. He fingered her pussy until she started begging him for more, and that was when he finally slid inside her.

“Fuuuuck,” he breathed as he adjusted to how Cosima clenched his dick. He tried to keep his thrusts slow and measured, wanting...no, needing it to last as long as possible. He teased her ass with his middle finger, sliding it in

centimeter by centimeter until he was buried up to his first knuckle, and then he started fucking her in tandem, enjoying the way she seemed to completely fall apart under him. The sharp curses, sobbing breaths, guttural cries, and screaming of his name had Tristan's balls tightening until he knew he couldn't hold off much longer. He kept his thrusts slow and steady while rocking his finger in her ass from side to side, trying to keep the rhythm Cosima seemed to enjoy so much. He continued until he felt her clench hard and then spasm repeatedly around him while her screams filled the quiet room.

Mission accomplished, he thought as he finally allowed himself to thrust into her hard and fast, hand moving to her lower back to keep her pressed into the bed until his head swam with the pleasure building inside him.

He came so violently that his body shook from it, and his groans gave way to whimpers as tiny pinpricks appeared behind his eyelids.

Damn.

Chapter 14

Cosima

Her entire body felt like it was floating. Cosima barely noticed when Tristan rolled off her and went to the bathroom to take care of the condom. She turned onto her back and stretched her arms above her head. She felt so properly and perfectly used. She'd had good sex and great sex...and then there was *this*. Her pussy still throbbed as she thought about how good he felt in her mouth, how good he felt in her pussy, and how good his finger felt in her ass. She should be satiated behind the force of the orgasm that had her screaming into his pillows, but Tristan awoke something feral inside her. All she wanted was to be on her knees with the length of his dick down her throat, against her cheeks, and between her breasts. She wanted to suck him until breathing was just a theory, and then she wanted to swallow every bit of his pleasure.

Those were the thoughts that filled her mind when Tristan returned from the bathroom and found her sitting up against the headboard with her legs spread, fingers deep in her pussy as she rolled and squeezed her nipples between her fingers.

She giggled when he swore under his breath but sat on the edge of the bed so he could get a better view. His dick bobbed as Cosima went about the business of truly putting on a show of pleasuring herself. She stroked herself and rubbed her clit, licking her juices from her fingers while making sure she maintained eye contact with him. It wasn't long before his dick was completely hard, and he started to wrap his hand around himself.

“Don’t touch yourself,” she moaned, surprised that Tristan immediately obeyed, placing his hands palms up on the bed.

Cosima continued thrusting her fingers harder and faster into her pussy as she whimpered, “That’s mine. But first, I’ve got to...”

Her words dropped off as the first stirrings of another orgasm began deep in her belly. Cosima kept fingering herself but brought her other hand to cover her clit, rubbing hard even as her fingers slid in and out of her wetness until she felt pleasure wash over her. She slowly brought her fingers to her lips, licking each one before she got off the bed on shaking legs. She kneeled before him and reached for his beautiful, thick length. Cosima tapped Tristan’s dick against her tongue a few times before she went about the business of pleasing him until he was fucking her mouth and whispering the nastiest things as she took him as far down her throat as her gag reflex would allow. She sucked him until he started trying to pull her off by her hair. She sucked him while he pleaded that he was about to cum. She sucked him until he bucked, and she felt salty, sticky warmth against her tongue.

And then she sucked him dry.

Cosima didn’t know where either of them found the strength to stagger to the bathroom, where Tristan carefully and patiently lathered her skin, placing gentle kisses against her shoulders until he was satisfied that she was clean.

She snuggled into one of his shirts after the shower, not bothering with her panties because Cosima fancied herself a practical woman at heart.

They worked together to finish preparing their Christmas lunch — even though it was damn near dinner time — with the synchronized precision of people who’d prepared a meal together many times before.

She couldn’t stop the warmth that spread in her chest as they sat at the dining room table, talking about everything and nothing as they ate their meal.

Cosima had imagined how her Christmas would look many times, but she hadn't imagined this. She *couldn't* have imagined this. Not even in her deepest fantasies, yet the Universe had led her straight to this man who was humming Christmas carols as they cleaned the kitchen together.

Tristan prepared hot chocolate for them while she got the movies set up, and she smiled when she tasted the hint of whiskey. Cosima knew she'd never be able to drink hot chocolate as she had before.

She allowed Tristan to snuggle her into him, resisting the urge to stick her hand down the fresh pair of sweatpants he'd put on, but it wasn't long before she felt his fingertips brush against her under the shirt.

"I thought you had things to tell me about *Die Hard*," she teased as he helped her pull the shirt over her head. His lips found her nipples, and he sucked on them for a while before responding, "I'll agree that *Home Alone* is a better Christmas movie if it means you'll let me hit it."

She laughed. "And I'll agree that *Home Alone* is a better Christmas movie if you let *me* hit it."

Tristan nuzzled her neck. "You strike a hard bargain, but I'm powerless to refuse."

His kisses were soft and gentle as he slid a hand along Cosima's legs. She opened them for him while he busied himself undressing and rolling on a condom. Tristan pressed his forehead against hers as he slid into her, inch by agonizing inch, capturing Cosima's lips in his as he began thrusting. She moaned against his lips, rocking her hips to meet each thrust. This was nothing like their frenzied coupling the first time they came together. Their lovemaking was soft and sweet and slow, and Cosima felt like her heart was expanding too large to fit in her chest as she held his gaze while Tristan made her feel so good she could barely contain the sobs in her throat.

They came together with each other's names on their lips, and Cosima was sure she'd never had a more beautiful experience.

That was until Tristan kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose, and eventually her lips and said, “Ask me what I think about kismet now.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “What you think about kismet?”

Tristan smiled that smile that made Cosima’s heart melt as he reached forward and kissed her softly before he finally answered.

“My kismet is you.”

THE END

Afterword

Thank you for taking this quick journey with Cosima and Tristan.

If you liked this book, please think about rating it and/or leaving a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads and telling your friends about it. Word of mouth is so important for indie authors.

Peace. Love. Light.

Rilzy

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About the Author

Rilzy Adams believes all you need is love. Or, at least it should. She may, or may not, be a huge Beatles fan. She spends too much time living in her head watching the romantic lives of her 'imaginary friends' play out and then being the chatty friend to tell the world about them. When she isn't living in her head, she must show up to work every day and be a lawyer. She resides, with her two dogs, on an island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, which is perfect for her sun addiction, love affair with Prosecco and sushi worship.

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