

THE PLIGHT before CHRISTMAS

AN UN-EX-PECTED
ROMANTIC DRAMEDY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KATE STEWART

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The Plight Before Christmas

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty.](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty.](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Recipe for Snowman Soup](#)

[Preview of Flock](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Thank You](#)

Clark Griswold was onto something, at least with his annual holiday meltdown. And since the last three weeks of my life have been riddled with humbug—another breakup, a broken toe, an office promotion I deserved and didn't get—I'm not at all in the mood to celebrate nor have the happ, happ, happiest Christmas EVER.

When Mom insisted that we all gather at my Grandparent's ancient cabin for an old school family Christmas, I fully intended to get into the holiday spirit with the help of the three wise men, Johnnie Walker, Jack Daniels, and Jim Beam. But those boys did absolutely *nothing* to offset the shock or temper the sting of seeing my EX on our doorstep the first day of our holiday soiree.

Apparently, Santa missed the memo, and this elf is pissed.

Stuck for a week with the man who obliterated my heart nearly two decades ago, I did the only thing I could do and put on my game face, thankful for the home advantage.

I knew better than to drink that last cup of eggnog.

I knew better than to get tongue tangled beneath the mistletoe with the only man to ever break my heart.

I knew better than to sleep with Satan's wingman on the eve of the Lord's birthday.

I could blame the nog. I could blame the deceitful light blue eyes, thick, angelic hair, and panty evaporating smirk... but mostly, I blame Eli because he always knew exactly which of my buttons to push.

I foolishly thought a family Christmas filled with nostalgia was going to turn my inner Scrooge around, but this year's festivities went up in flames. Leave it to the ghost of my Christmas past to be the one to light the match.

Fa la la la la, FML.

For my family, who keeps me grounded. I love you dearly.

.

.

.

.

And...after twenty-five books, I think it is finally time to acknowledge the asshats that broke my heart. Thanks for the ammo.

LISTEN TO THE PLIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS
PLAYLIST AS YOU READ

CHAPTER ONE



Fa la la la la, la *FUCK MY LIFE*.

“Congratulations, Stuart,” I grit out, tapping my jingle-bell-covered plastic wine glass against his.

“That sounded *really sincere*,” amusement drips from his timbre as he shoots me a sideways glance, “but thanks, Whitney.” Side by side, we scan the escalating spectacle of our overindulging co-workers. Internally, I begin to place bets on those most likely to do some shame walking in the morning. My lips lift when my eyes land on Sophie, who appears to be in the midst of an intimate conversation with Jonathan, a man she’s pined for since he joined the firm a year and a half ago. They’re tucked into a corner, their posture suggestive—his more than hers—and though I can tell she’s trying to keep her cool, she’s glowing, her expression a mix of elation, shock, and desire. Despite the slight lift of my lips and my inner ‘you go girl’ chant, I can’t help but address the animosity for the man standing next to me, which takes precedence as my blood continues to simmer. Taking a sip of my wine, I let it rest on my tongue a full ten seconds in an effort to stop myself while the high road is still within reach. It’s the hard swallow of more than the wine that has me exiting to basic bitch street.

“We both know I deserved it. I worked the overtime. I landed the biggest account and ran the most successful campaign of the year.”

“There’s no *I* in team, Collins,” he smirks into his cup.

“Ah, but there is one in *ass-kisser*.”

“Whitney, Stuart, are you two playing nice?” Our boss, Rich, saunters up to us, looking every bit the business Santa with his snow-white hair, prominent bulging belly hanging over his suit slacks, and beet red cheeks due to his holiday party indulgence. Forcing a smile, I flash all of my teeth as if Rich didn’t drive an axe through my future when he announced Stuart would be the new Senior VP of marketing.

“I was just congratulating him,” I retort evenly.

“She did,” Stuart assures Rich as he speeds down the high road while pushing his glasses up his sleek brown-tinted nose. Well, maybe his nose isn’t brown, but his personality repulses me. Okay, he’s mostly a nice guy, some might say saintly, but he *is* an ass-kisser—I stand firm on that. Stuart is also an avid golfer, which gave him an advantage over me because Rich is his preferred golfing buddy, and the two have been gracing the office with twin shit-eating grins and matching sunburns since early spring. Their long ‘lunches’ and ‘Stepbrother’ karate in the basement bonding have made me the odd woman out. As much as I would like to believe sexism has become less frequent in the workplace, Rich is a prime example of why it still exists. Rich is old enough to have been wet behind the ears during the ‘Mad Men’ era, which means I was screwed before I ever earned my spot in the running for VP.

It was a hundred percent a boy’s club move that he got the position due to their bromance and Rich’s belief that the cock wielding man standing next to me is a better choice for the position. While I worked endless hours wooing the clients and spearheading the campaigns, Stuart took off at precisely six pm every night—even during crunch time—pulling the *family first* card.

As if that’s an excuse.

Okay, maybe the fact that he’s a youth minister and coaches in an inner-city program is an excuse to leave early a few days a

week, but there are other days of the week he could have been at the office, working the hours I work.

Even if he insists he has to get home every night to his pregnant wife—a psychiatrist who specializes in helping army veterans integrate back into society after deployment—there's no excuse.

Fuck Stuart.

Just because I'm on regular birth control, and don't have a golf swing, doesn't mean I'm not worthy.

I'm just...independent.

I don't need a family or a selfless purpose outside of work to be a staple in my community. In addition to my ridiculous work ethic, I do, on occasion, bring coffee into the office. And I'm a believer of sorts. I just don't believe that waking up at 7 a.m. on Sunday cements my commitment to the man upstairs.

Besides, I need my sleep to be able to work the hours Stuart doesn't.

Trying my best to maintain my smile and nod when it's appropriate, it dawns on me that I may be going to hell for this line of thinking.

I'm resentful at the moment because the last three weeks have been hell on earth. More recently, due to the announcement that Mr. Perfect, golf playing, #lifegoals, family man, and upstanding citizen has just snagged my promotion and reason for living. This news only confirmed that my losing streak wouldn't end anytime soon.

Anyone who's had my recent run of luck would be feeling a bit acrimonious and stabby, especially after the last few minutes of hearing how deserving Stuart was of the position. It was the bitter freaking maraschino cherry on top of the shit sundae I've been shoveling down for the last three weeks.

More resentment seeps in as I eye the spacious vacant office behind the two men congratulating each other for being able to spell their names when they urinate. An office I've pined and busted my ass for since I started at the firm. For years, I've strived to be at the top of my field, to be recognized. But as of late, life has pulled all the punches, the most recent to the throat.

It all started with my broken toe exactly three weeks ago, an accident I acquired dodging dog shit on my morning run. In a sick twist of irony, I leapt toe first into a fire hydrant coated in fresh piss, no doubt a gift from the same pooch. From then on, it's been a slow-moving train wreck in *every* aspect of my life.

Exactly one week after I broke my toe, Kyle's condom broke. This led to hysteria, *my* hysteria. My reasoning? The man I was canoodling with was easy on the eyes, but by a landslide, the most clueless man I've ever dated. Even with my prehistoric uterus and the odds of never conceiving in my favor, I wasn't taking any chances.

Harsh? Definitely.

But our breakup went a little something like this.

"I don't think this is going to work."

"Why?"

"Because we're in different places."

"I don't understand, Whitney. We're both in my apartment."

Game over.

I'd only been playing it because dodging him when I wasn't in need was far too easy. He believed *any* excuse I gave him. At one point, it became a sport to see what excuses I could get away with. I had a very good reason to play with Kyle temporarily because, by guesstimate, he has the most perfect eight-inch penis, and he was excellent at using it. Staying with him for that *length* of time, again, eight inches, I consider justified at this stage in my life.

While I pride myself on being a resourceful, capable gal, I was not about to give that dynamic up due to our complete and utter failure to communicate. With Kyle, I did not require romance or stimulating conversation. I needed release after a twelve-hour day at the office. The good thing about Kyle? He was *always* in a good mood. Good mood meant no nights *I* was in the mood were off the table. He was my human scratching post. But when the condom broke, and the fear that I might have procreated with the dumbed-down *FRIENDS* version of Joey set in, I had to end it.

I'll take the guilt over objectifying him and discarding him over pregnancy with a walking dildo. In truth, some nights, the guilt wins. As I ignore the Rich and Stuart love fest, I send up a quick prayer that Kyle finds someone who deserves him because I did not warrant a second of his devotion. He might not have been my intellectual equal, but he was warm, caring, and present, which is the most I've gotten out of a relationship in *years*.

The next blow came when my car broke down on the way home—post-breakup—and the only mechanic I had on speed dial was, in fact, eight-inch Kyle. A car I planned on replacing the second I got my pay increase with the VP announcement.

Circling the drain, I again glance into Stuart's new office and mourn over my now worthless redecorating plans when my assistant, Zoe, sidles up to me as Stuart and Rich inch their way toward the party, *away* from me.

Zoe follows my line of sight to see Rich place his hand on Stuart's shoulder, and I feel the sting in my throat as I swallow down another sip of wine.

"You were robbed. You deserved it, and everyone here knows it. Even if Stuart is the nicest man on the planet."

I turn to Zoe, an intern I recruited this past May, just after she graduated. From her expression, she's genuinely upset for me, and it brings me some comfort. Shoulders easing back from two glasses of cheap wine—because Rich's namesake is a farce, and the man is, ironically, the cheapest bastard I know—I turn to her and share my disappointment.

"Do you ever think, 'what's the point?' When you get what you want, you only end up wanting more. I mean, you work hard your *whole life* and go after something, and then you get it, and then what? Maybe you realize it's not worth it. I mean, it happens that way with *everything* anyway. You meet the perfect guy, you're completely in sync, and the first time he kisses you, you discover he has halitosis. Or you finally buy and wear that pair of shoes you worshipped and saved for months to buy only to find they're the most uncomfortable heels on the planet. I mean, for what? In the end, no one gives a shit you wore those heels. We should just save ourselves the back pain and buy flats and a vibrator because—at the end of the day—all we're left with is the credit card bill for uncomfortable shoes we can't afford and

inevitable heartache. It's like...no matter what we do, or what we *want*, we're going to get disappointed, and then we age, wrinkle, and then you know..." I slide my finger across my throat.

My twenty-three-year-old assistant pales considerably as she gapes at me in pure terror while I tumble ass first into rock bottom.

Too far, Whit. Way too far!

Odd looks get shot my way when I belt out a Disney villain cackle that sounds foreign even to me. I clamp a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Kidding. I'm kidding."

She graces me with an uncomfortable laugh and accompanying lie. "I know."

It's apparent she's now terrified of me, or for me. I'm not sure which is worse. Though we've grown closer in the last six months, I'm too embarrassed to decipher which.

"Don't worry, Zoe. I'm afraid of heights, so I won't be headed for the roof tonight. Are you taking off?" She stalls, the picture of youth, beauty, and a bright future. One I hope I haven't tainted with my rancorous tongue.

"Yeah, I'm going to meet up with my boyfriend. We're driving to his parents tonight."

"So, it's getting serious? We're meeting the parents?"

"Yeah, it sort of happened this week."

The fact that she seems to be apologetic about it only worsens my guilt. My own assistant can see the depths of my despair.

"That's wonderful." I give her my most genuine smile. "I'm so happy for you."

It's hard not to spot the relief in her eyes. "Thank you. I'm excited and nervous."

"No need to be. They'll adore you. *He's the lucky one*, and don't you dare forget it."

Another dazzling flash of teeth. "Thanks, boss."

"Zoe, for the millionth time, call me Whitney." I turn back to the party as the deafening sound of feedback from the karaoke

microphone blasts through the floor, announcing that most everyone will be calling an Uber.

“That’s my cue,” I jest. “I’m right behind you.”

Zoe nods and briefly lifts the iPhone she forever has plastered to her hand. “I’ll have my phone on, just in case.”

“Don’t you dare,” I say sternly. “I won’t. Take the time off. You’re going to need it. We may be down, but we’re *not out*.” Even I can hear the false bravado in that statement. My get up and go has fucking left the building, and I make the decision to follow it.

“Merry Christmas, Zoe.”

“You, too. And thanks so much for the bonus.”

“You earned it.” It’s all I can manage around the now consistent burn in my throat due to the unwelcome emotion threatening to overtake me.

Zoe does me a solid by playing immune to my rapidly glossing eyes and, with one last wave, walks toward the elevator.

Tiptoeing around the arrival of my mid-life crisis, I bid farewell to those closest to me as I grab my coat from my office. Ambling down the hall to make my overdue exit, I wince as the onslaught of the worse imaginable rendition of “*Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*” is belted out by our graphics guru, Paula.

Sophie appears by my side as I scan the party one last time, trying to muster the ability to match the same confidence I had in my step this morning.

“Oh, my God, Whitney, you’re not going to believe this!” Sophie belts in an intended whisper that ends up more like a scream, only matched by the donkey-sounding wails erupting from Paula. I pray to God no one is recording her because surely tomorrow she would deem it blackmail worthy with sober ears.

Turning to Sophie, I give her a grin. “I *saw*. Walk me to the elevator. I can’t handle this.”

Sophie giggles, giddy, a rare sound from the cynical friend I adore so much. But the cynic seems to have been swallowed up briefly by the six-foot shot of dopamine just injected by her crush. Love does that to people.

I knew what that felt like once.

“I know. She sounds like a donkey on crack.”

There’s my girl.

“I was just thinking the same.”

“You know you could blow the roof off this place, and you should.”

“Hard pass.” I glance over to soak in her glow. “I saw you two huddled in the corner. Spill.”

“He’s taking me for drinks after he shoots off one last email and locks up.” Snatching an oversized cupcake with a mountain of green icing, I flick off the paper Holy Jolly Santa standing atop it as we stride toward the elevator.

“We made small talk at first, it was innocent, but after a few minutes, it was like...we both finally had enough of skirting around the attraction. I was just about to speak up, and he beat me to it...and gah...” She practically bounces on her heels.

“What did he say?”

“He said he was tired of wondering what I was thinking. It was just, Jesus, the *way* he said it.”

For the second time in ten minutes, I manage a genuine smile. It seemed that the people in my every day were experiencing the opposite effect of the three-week kickoff to the winter of my discontent.

It was a boyfriend you didn't have feelings for.

Your toe has almost healed.

You've needed a new car for years, not weeks.

Stuart got the promotion. You'll deal.

Even as I try to coax myself into better thinking, the weight of the last blow is too heavy to ignore.

“Sounds like it’s going to be a good night. I’m so happy for you.”

Sophie gives me a concerned side-eye as I push the elevator button.

“I’m so sorry about the promotion. If it helps, you handled it like a rockstar. If you need me tonight, I can—”

“Don’t you dare. I’m leaving for North Carolina first thing tomorrow, and I still haven’t packed. I’ll deal. I really am so happy for you, and you better text me.”

“Sure?”

“Positive. I’m good, swear.”

She glances toward the party as Jonathan emerges from his office, his eyes searching for her in the crowd. We both watch as he scans the space, and I can feel the anticipation rattling from her frame.

“Go,” I urge, and she pulls me into a quick hug. I have to fight to keep my cupcake intact.

“Merry Christmas, Whit.”

A lump forms in my throat, and I shake off the emotion, too afraid for her to see just how much I needed her hug.

“Merry Christmas,” I murmur. “Go get your man, and don’t you dare forget to text me.”

She blinds me with her smile, and I see her demeanor shift as she tosses back her shoulders and confidently strides toward Jonathan—a slight sway in her hips. A sway Jonathan’s gaze doesn’t miss when his eyes land on her, a sexy, satisfied smile upturning his lips.

Soaking in the vicarious moment, I envy her as I live it with her, excited for the text to come. Even in my disgruntled state, I feel an ancient part of me—a part that constantly hoped for those types of moments—stir to consciousness as the elevator opens.

Once inside, I juggle my purse and my consolation cupcake and check my phone to see a missed text from my sister.

Serena: When are you coming?

Tomorrow.

Serena: What time are you getting here?

When I show up.

Serena: Give me a time.

Annoyed, I cram the enormous cupcake into my mouth to free my fingers.

Curious as to when your babysitter is arriving? You're going to have to stick that duty on Grandma this year. Heads up, I'll be drunk the entire time.

Serena: You've been so bitchy lately. I'm just excited to see you. Or I *was*.

Sorry. Just found out Stuart got the promotion. 😞

Serena: I forgot you were going to find out today. I know how much you wanted it. I'm so sorry.

Thanks.

Serena: Well, hurry up and get here. I'll cheer you up. And just wait until you see the place. Mom went all out. It's going to be great. You'll see.

Normally, I'd jump at the chance to spend time with my family, but no part of me is excited about the days to come because of the amount of enthusiasm I'll have to fake to make it through. Any amount of Christmas mojo I had was snatched away with the VP announcement. At the same time, a tiny ray of hope buds inside of me that my family may just be the thing to knock me out of my slump.

K. Excited. Love you.

Mouth stuffed beyond capacity, I begin to wipe the excess from my face when the elevator door opens. It's when I hear the strangled karaoke streaming in that I realize, along with a napkin, I forgot to push the lobby button. Not only that, the entirety of my mouth and chin are covered in neon green icing as I come face to face with the two most attractive of my co-workers, Jared and Wes. Both early thirties recruits Rich brought in this year, stating they were 'the future of the firm.' They came in guns blazing and snagged a campaign from beneath me. Two men I threatened to take down just minutes after the client left. Two men who now gape at me with widening eyes as I furiously wipe the icing away from my squirrel nut-filled mouth—humiliated. Wes lowers his eyes in embarrassment for me as I do my best to swallow some of it down.

I take a step back as their collective colognes fill the elevator, and both turn their backs to me. Jared makes a show of pushing the L button, his frame shaking with silent laughter before he speaks up with a salty tongue.

“Tough break on the promotion, Collins.”

Wes—the less cut-throat of the two—glances at me over his shoulder, pity evident in his gaze.

This is rock bottom.

CHAPTER TWO



Suitcase open and waiting on my bed, I sip on the wine I uncorked last night, rather than popping the champagne I bought three months ago in preparation for celebration. An expensive bottle I charged when told I was in the running for VP. A few gulps in, I submerge into my waiting bath, body humming with relief when my phone pings. Unable to resist due to Sophies impending update on Jonathan, I lift it from the side of the tub to see yet another email chain from my father. Allen Collins—much like my mother—does not mess around when it comes to Christmas. Holiday enthusiasts would be an understatement where my parents are concerned.

Dad's got a serious agenda this year and even included a mission statement. It amazes me how creative he's become since retiring. So far, he's got our family holiday mapped out to the point that it seems more like a war plan. Google documents have become his latest obsession. So far, I've filled out *four*. Tonight's document is solely for the purpose of karaoke music requests. I blame my father for my organizational skills and the lack of sanity that occurs when things don't go according to my grand plans. Hence the hard loss that I'm trying to numb myself from and the sting that I was supposed to be celebrating tonight, and possibly on the prowl for a new part-timer like Kyle. As my career aspiration bubble bursts, I fight to stay in relaxation mode

as long as possible, knowing that the next week is going to be nothing short of chaotic. Foregoing a reply to drown in my pity tub, it becomes impossible with the slew of incoming replies.

December 19, 2021

Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

Dear Clark,

I know you mean well by gathering intel on the importance of choices like Christmas turkey or ham, but my son just literally took a dump in my hand. So, while I understand the significance of a good karaoke selection, I must insist that we fly by the seat of our pants and live a little. Spontaneity never hurts anyone. Right now, I'm in the mood to sing gangster rap. Tomorrow might feel like an eighties rock ballad.

Sincerely,

Your son with literal *shit* to deal with.

Brenden Collins

CEO Networth Inc.

December 19, 2021

Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

Son,

In all the time you were ranting that you had no time, you could have filled out the form. Get it done. No excuses. And stop comparing me to Clark Griswold. He has an ass chin. I'm much, much better looking.

Dad

Donor of the sperm that created you.

December 19, 2021

Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

I miss the days when you couldn't figure out how to text, and you put LOL at the end of everything.

Best,

The only sperm that counts. Please keep in mind that this is my COMPANY email address.

**Brenden Collins
CEO Networth Inc.**

Serena chimes in next.

**December 19, 2021
Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke**

Filled it out Dad. Love you. -Serena O'Neal sent via iPhone

**December 19, 2021
Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke**

**Serena,
You're in the next room. You could have told me.
Dad**

**December 19, 2021
Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke**

**You guys are blowing up my email. Stop replying all.
Serena is an ass-kisser.**

**Sincerely,
The only person worthy of carrying on the family name.**

**Brenden Collins
CEO Networth Inc.**

**December 19, 2021
Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke**

I don't have your form in yet, Son.

Allen Collins
#BOSS

December 19, 2021
Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

This isn't social media, Dad. You don't use hashtags on email. LOL.
-Serena O'Neal sent via iPhone

An automated reply from Brenden pops up immediately.

December 19, 2021
Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

I'm currently out of the office until January 3rd. Please email my assistant for further assistance—adriadillion@networthinc.com

Brenden Collins
CEO Networth Inc.

December 19, 2021
Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

Happy Holidays Adria,

I'm writing in regard to my son's lack of capability in filling out a simple form. I'm unsure at this point how he graduated from college and obtained the position necessary to occupy a CEO desk chair and take a salary. Please see attached Google document and assist him in filling it out. This is time-sensitive, so I appreciate your help in resolving this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

Allen Collins
President of all things Collins
#fillouttheformson

#imashamedyourethewinningsperm

I belt out my first genuine laugh of the day and set the phone down, knowing Brenden is going to have Dad's ass for going there. I emerge from underwater a minute later when Adria's reply comes through.

December 19, 2021

Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

Dear Mr. Collins,

I'm not at all surprised by your request, nor your complaint. Your son has a self-inflated ego that can often compromise him at home. As his wife's best friend and the sole reason they stay married, I sympathize completely. Also, I often hear him jamming out to old eighties girl groups, and last week, I believe he was belting out something by Heart. This should make an interesting selection. I will fill out the document on his behalf with a few more choice songs I think all will enjoy. All my sympathy for your embarrassment.

Adria Dillion

Senior Assistant, Networth Inc.

December 19, 2021

Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

Christmas is canceled. Adria is fired. I hope you're happy, Clark.

Brenden Collins

CEO Networth Inc.

December 19, 2021

Subject: Collins Christmas Karaoke

Heart and The Bangles? Really, son? Where are your balls?

Allen Collins

Father of two daughters

Thoroughly entertained but deciding not to engage, I unplug the drain, dry, dress, and fill out the form before packing. After lugging my case to the door, I glance around my lifeless apartment and decide that time with my family is exactly what I need to turn things around. Just as I go to turn off the TV, Judy Garland's "*Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*" plays in the background of a commercial. I decide to take it as a sign. The upside of bottoming out is that it can only get better from here... right?

CHAPTER THREE



Taking a right on the short road that dead-ends at my grandparent's cabin, my engine whines in protest due to the steepness of the hill and the fact that my car is an outdated piece of shit incapable of handling mountainous terrain. Stupidly, I celebrated too soon when I crossed into North Carolina at the Tennessee border. Thirty seconds away from parking safely, I'm reminded the celebration was premature.

"No, God, no, no!" The engine begins to steam and stall as the incline plasters me back to my seat just as I catch sight of the cabin which sits to the left, perched only a handful of yards from the edge of the cliff. Terrified I'll somehow backslide, I send up a thousand prayers and miraculously manage to take the sharp left, up another steep incline, and into the driveway.

Heart pounding, I peel my ghostly white fingers from the wheel and sigh in relief, knowing I should've bit the bullet in buying a new car months ago, but I waited in vain. With the increase in salary from my promotion, I planned on buying a shiny new SUV, something with leather seats that practically drives itself.

Though I make a good living with my executive salary, I've kept the sedan far past its reliable years for some inexplicable reason.

The car itself declares its existence and our time together over as it exacerbates sputtering to its death as the morning full of hope I mustered in the six-hour drive evaporates—much like the smoke seeping from all sides of my hood. Breathing out a sigh of relief, I kick back into my seat and slowly exhale. Reaching behind the passenger seat, I blindly rummage through my supply box and grip whatever bottle is closest. Once armed, I unscrew the top and down a mouthful of warm Jack Daniels to settle my nerves.

Two weeks. I have two weeks to formulate a course of action and decide on a new career goal. Six of those days will be spent here with my family to distract me from the pressure of making said plans. I'll use every one of those six days to ignore the idea of putting on heels and striding through the office again as the powerhouse I had hoped to be.

Though I can't deny the majority of my current dismay stems from the fact that I'm once again the only family member arriving *alone*.

Mr. Right never came, and after last night, I realized I may never be the career woman I hoped to become. Because if I were thriving at that, at least I would have ample excuse—a decent enough reason to be a failure in my personal life.

No one girl can have it all, right?

And with the death of my white horse, I'm officially the poor man's version of Bridget Jones. Except I don't expect to meet the love of my life wearing an ugly Christmas jumper, nor do I see myself forgoing alcohol units only to have two devastatingly gorgeous British men engaging in a street fight over my affection in the near future.

If only.

Screwing the cap back on, I pop in a breath mint and mentally note my first New Year's resolution.

“Pity party over, Whitney. You'll buy a new car and a kickass pair of heels to match. Gloves up. You'll come back swinging.”

As the Jack warms me, I survey the cabin, the sight of it bringing me unexpected solace because it's *exactly* as I remember it.

It's been far too long since we've all gathered here. Our Christmases usually take place in my parent's home back in Nashville, where Serena and I still live. My brother, Brenden, left Nashville and moved his family—his *life*—to Charlotte a year ago to base his company out of the city where a majority of his top billing clients live.

Nestled together in the seventies built, two-story A-Frame, it's here where we'll congregate for the next six days. Chest tightening with nostalgia, my Grampa Joe's voice rings clear in my head.

“Just remember when times get hard, when your problems are blinding you, that you're on a floating planet in the middle of a vast galaxy filled with the unexplainable, and the only thing holding you to it is an invisible force you can't see.”

“Gravity,” I whisper softly, the effect of the cabin itself a balm to the knowledge that Grammy and Gramps aren't inside waiting to greet me. Grams and I will never again have a long convo while Gramps snoozes next to her in his matching recliner.

Budding winter has already taken a toll on the landscape, a majority of the shrubbery and surrounding grounds lifeless from the previous snows, but the charm is ever present. Outside, it looks like a large cottage, majestic in a way with a grand, steep roof and large windows. A series of wooden steps lead up to the porch to the dark, oak door. White lights adorn all corners of the roof, making it look more like a gingerbread house, no doubt due to Dad's careful execution. From the outside, it looks very much like it could house a fairytale, but within the cabin walls are memories more precious to me than any work of fiction could ever come close to.

Aside from our family home in Tennessee, a large part of my childhood took place here in North Carolina. Brenden, Serena, and I spent many summers camping in the backyard. Those nights consisted of the four of us gazing up at the stars, held captive by Grandpa Joe's stories.

Gramps was a wise man—warm, levelheaded, funny, laid back. From the time we were young, he did his best to drill his life's philosophy into our heads.

And I'd forgotten it the last few months. I've been barricading myself behind my work as an excuse to keep my distance from my sister and my parents because—at this point in my life—I'm starting to feel a little directionless. My brother is easy to avoid because he lives a state away, but Serena lives only a half-hour away from my condo in Nashville. And she's demanding in the sense that she must know what's going on in every aspect of her little sister's life.

Eyeing Serena's monster SUV, I exhale a calming breath knowing that the minute I set foot inside, the chaos will begin. My name will become the bane of my existence, and as far as Serena is concerned, I will be considered 'the help' for as long as I take up residence here.

"Stop it. You love them. Now let them distract you."

Just as I reach for the handle, the front door opens, and my mother's hand pops out in a come-hither gesture. My heart warms knowing she was looking for me.

Chuckling, I unbuckle my seatbelt and step out just as she graces the porch, a welcoming and soul-warming smile on her face.

"Get in here, Sweet Pea." The sound of my nickname nearly sets me off as I wearily climb the stairs before molding myself into her open arms.

"Hey, Mom." I inhale her scent, a mix of Elizabeth Arden's Red Door and butterscotch. Breathing in deep, I clutch her tightly to me.

"This is a damn good hug," she murmurs, "life been kicking your ass, kid?"

"You have no idea."

"Gravity."

"Gravity," I reply with a sigh, keeping her tight in my grip. "I was just thinking about Grampa Joe."

"Even from the window, I could see the weight of the world on your shoulders. Is your car, oh honey, is it *smoking*?"

"Just kicked the bucket," I mumble against the shoulder of her sweater. "I'm going to have it towed away."

She pulls away, frowning at the sight of it. “Well, crap. Maybe your father can tinker with it.”

“No, it’s okay. I was going to buy a new one anyway. It’s past time.” She looks over to me with concern.

“I’m okay. Really. It’s been a rough month. Seeing this place and knowing they aren’t here has me a little emotional. I miss them.” I study Mom’s profile as she glances back at my car. At sixty-one, she’s still beautiful, effortlessly so. She’s never dyed her hair a day in her life, and despite that, it’s still predominately blonde. I take after her in that way, along with my eye color and petite build. We’re on the shorter side, both 5’2. Though Mom looks incredible without too much fuss, it now takes every bit of my toolbox to make me look presentable.

At thirty-eight, I can still pull off a hat trick or two, though my sun-kissed, dewy days are mostly behind me. Mom gazes around the property—her childhood home—and I can only imagine twice as many memories are swimming around in her mind.

My grandparents took a *Notebook* sort of exit. Two years ago, Grampa Joe passed away, and just days later, after she’d comforted my mom, Grammy joined him. We were told they passed due to natural causes, but we all knew better. After fifty-one years of marriage, they couldn’t last without the other. And while it left us all devastated, it comforted us that they went together.

Mom stands next to me, seeming lost in her thoughts as a gust of icy wind kicks up. “You okay, you know, being here?” None of us have been back to the cabin since the funeral, and before that, it had been years. Normally, Grammy and Gramps made the trip to Nashville because we all lived there at one point. They swore they didn’t mind traveling, though Grampa Joe’s driving scared us half to death.

“I got a little blue when we first got here, but it’s good to be home. It feels...*right*. Come inside,” she rubs her shoulders, “it’s freezing.”

I step into the house with her on my heels and gasp at the sight before me. “Oh, Mom! It looks incredible!”

“Yeah?” She surveys the house with me, a pride-filled smile blooming on her face as I take it all in. “I tried to do it like Mom, but I don’t think I’ll ever be able to recreate it like she did.”

Grammy left nothing untouched with her holiday décor and annually emptied every single box of decorations without fail. If there was a stray bow left in the bin, she made use of it. The Christmases we spent here in North Carolina were nothing short of magical. It feels the same now as I stand in the entryway, completely awed by my surroundings, inhaling the familiar citrus and spice in the air.

“Did I ever tell you about the time that she wrapped all the cabinet doors and the coffee tables in wrapping paper?” Mom’s smile widens, and I shake my head. “She did?”

“Sounds insane, I know, but it looked amazing. She was so good at this stuff.”

“Well, don’t be so modest. You are too. It’s absolutely perfect.” Full credit to my mother. It feels like I’ve been transported back in time. Just to the right of where we stand at the entry, the banister of the staircase that leads to the second floor is draped with real garland, holly, and gradually dimming white lights. Just ahead is a long hall that leads to the kitchen. To the left of the entrance is a large, cozy living room with a cathedral ceiling. The view from the vantage point where the house sits on the cliff is spectacular due to the snow-covered mountain directly across the street.

The furniture, though slightly outdated, is overstuffed and comfortable, making it feel lived in and cozy. A wood-burning and massive stone fireplace takes up most of the wall opposite the hall. Just next to one of the A-frame windows sits a gigantic pine tree covered from bow to trunk in twinkling lights, tubs of ornaments stacked next to it in preparation.

The entire house is cloaked in Christmas, lit up like a carnival, and soaked in varying shades of red, green, silver, and gold.

Just across the living room, oversized ornaments hang from the ceiling over a carefully decorated and large dining room table.

Grinning with pride, I soak in the feel of it. Martha Stewart doesn’t have shit on Ruby Collins.

Nat King Cole croons out about chestnuts on an open fire as the memories flood me. Everything about the setup reminds me of a time when things were much simpler—when life was so much easier to navigate. When the bulk of my life seemed like something to look forward to more than reflect on. Life-changing decisions weren't so absolute because it felt like I had all the time in the world.

Eyes glazing with sentiment and happiness, I turn to my mother, and she stares back at me, her expression lit with satisfaction at my reaction. My voice shakes when I speak. "Mom..."

"It's like they're here, isn't it?"

"It's just how I remember it." I yank her to me and hug her again, a little sob escaping me. "I didn't know how much I needed this."

"Oh, Sweet Pea, me neither. Merry Christmas. I've been missing you."

"Merry Christmas. And I'm sorry I haven't called much lately." Feeling relieved and more excited about the days to come, Mom and I gather ourselves, wiping away our emotions, twin smiles on our faces just as a shriek comes from the loft room above.

"Give it back, right now!" Gracie, my nine-year-old niece screeches. Like most single-digit kids on the verge of hormone explosion, she acts more on the verge of thirty...until she melts down.

"And just like that. I need a drink," Mom says, rolling her eyes.

"I've got you covered," I chime. "Smart move putting me in charge of the booze."

"Give it back," Gracie squeals, and it's then I realize it's my sister she's pleading with. "Mom, *please*, I need it."

"We discussed this on the ride here—no cell phones. Grammy and Gramps want us to be present. And the reception here sucks anyway."

I can picture Gracie planting her hand on her hips. "What am I supposed to do!?"

“First, keep it down, immediately. Second, I don’t know, kid, maybe spend time with your family?”

“You’re ruining my life!”

“Well, that’s tradition, so I’m doing something right.”

“Dad!” Gracie groans, and I smile when my brother-in-law, Thatch, replies. “No way in hell I’m getting in the middle of this. Stop screaming, Gracie, and listen to your mother.”

“Here we go,” I sigh through my grin. Mom and I collectively cringe as the screeches become impossible to decipher.

“I think I’ll wait for the mushroom cloud to disperse before I announce I’m here. Where’s Dad?”

“He’s out tinkering with more lights. He’s not going to be satisfied until he’s strung up everything in the shed. He’s already fallen off that ancient ladder.” She shakes her head. “Half his ass is purple.”

“I could’ve done without that visual.”

Mom laughs and nudges me with her shoulder. “I’m just about to start dinner.”

“Need help?”

“Nope, It’s lasagna. I prepped it last night. Why don’t you grab the booze and your suitcase and get settled in.” She winces.

“What?”

“You’re in the attic. Sorry, your brother and sister need more space with the kids, and...”

“It’s cool. I’ve made peace with my place in the Raggedy Ann and Andy room.”

Her eyes soften. “Honey, it’s not a punishment. They just need the room.”

“No worries. I’m happy to take it.” My mood has lifted dramatically in the last few minutes. Even as Gracie shrieks from above, an octave below shattering glass.

“Mom, you can’t do this to me!”

Mom leans over to me in a whisper. “She just got her first period.”

“What!? She’s only nine.”

“God has a sense of humor, doesn’t he? She got it *last night*.”

“Wonderful.”

“Oh, and your brother is bringing someone.”

“What?” I frown at her. “I thought this was going to be family only.”

“Some guy he works with. Apparently, they’ve become great friends. We’ve set him up in the den.”

“It’s Christmas, and he’s bringing some *stray* here?”

“Not a stray to Brenden.”

“Please tell me this isn’t some attempt to set me up.”

“If only, but your brother is not that forward-thinking. Apparently, Eliot, I think that’s his name, was planning on spending Christmas *alone*. It’s sad, really. One more won’t hurt us, and he’s got to be feeling out of sorts coming into a co-worker’s house for the holiday. Can you imagine? So, you’re going to make him feel welcome, do you hear me, Sweet Pea?”

“Will there be anything else, Ruby? Are you going to tell me Santa isn’t real?”

She cringes.

“Oh, no. No. No—”

“Your aunt is coming on Wednesday to spend the day with us.”

“Oh, come on!” I throw my hands up. “You should have saved that bomb for drink two.”

“If *I* can tolerate your father’s sister for an afternoon, so can you. She’s his last living relative, and we all have to make an effort. Time is precious, and besides, it’s Christmas.”

“Right.”

“Oh, look, it’s starting.” I follow her line of sight to the wall of windows in the living room to see a flurry of large snowflakes cascading toward the frozen ground.

“Weatherman said it might not stick, but I’m hoping it will linger this round so we’ll have a white Christmas.” Mom exhales

dreamily before jumping out of her skin when Gracie fully begins to meltdown above us.

“Dad, please don’t let her take my phone!”

Mom sighs. “You better get your things and get back in before it really starts coming down, and *please* don’t forget the booze.”

“No chance of that.”

CHAPTER FOUR



After sneaking my suitcase past my sister's fighting family on the second floor, I take the steep steps up into the tiny attic bedroom. Walking over to the twin bed, I plop my suitcase on the mattress and eye my mother's childhood dolls, Raggedy Ann and Andy, where they sit situated on the pillows. Running my fingers over Raggedy Ann's yarn hair, it warms me from inside out that four generations have made memories in this cabin.

For me, family is the definition of gravity.

After ditching my suitcase, I haul my wrapped presents in and place them neatly under the tree before lugging the box filled to the brim with booze into the kitchen.

"Bless you, child," Mom tosses over her shoulder as she sticks a ginormous pan of her lasagna into the oven.

"Sure you don't need help?"

"No, kid, mix yourself a drink and go say hello to your father."

"Yes, ma'am."

After pouring myself a stiff iced whiskey with a splash of coke, I set off to find my Dad. Being an aunt is one of the greatest privileges of my life but being commandeered in a house with my nieces and nephews for days on end is a different story. There's

nowhere to hide, and I'm used to a more uneventful and calm state of domestic existence. In that sense, I'm a true old maid.

Taking a healthy sip of Jack, I make my way from the kitchen to the adjacent den and exit the sliding glass door. Stepping onto the massive porch that corners the right side of the house, I soak in the mountain view across the street before following the sound of soft grunts. I find the lower half of my Dad on a ladder as he staples lights to the low point of the roof.

"Hey, Daddy," I greet him, and he ducks under the cover of the roof, snow falling steadily past his coated shoulders, a smile lighting up his face. "Hey, Sweet Pea. You just get in?"

"Yes, Sir. What are you doing stringing up more lights? You know you're only going to have to take them down in a week."

"Joe would've wanted it this way." My father is a bear of a man, large frame, large hands, prominent features, a stark contrast to my mother and me. I study his profile as he descends the ladder and take note that the man I once saw as immortal and invincible is starting to show real signs of aging. This makes his brief hug priceless for me and the drive one hundred percent worth it. That is until he grabs my drink and tosses it back like it's his.

Glass empty, he sucks some of the ice into his mouth, siphoning as much of the liquor as he can. "Your mother won't let me have a drink until after dinner, *the witch*."

"Feeling a little stressed, Dad?" I laugh as he again drains the glass for a drop more. I half expect him to tongue it like a giraffe with the way he's bleeding it dry.

"No, why would you ask that?"

I raise my brows as Gracie's voice echoes through the window above us.

"Fine," he lifts guilty eyes to mine. "I'm pretending to be busy so I can avoid Gracie. She's been screaming at your sister since they pulled up yesterday."

He wipes his mouth and darts his fear-filled eyes past my shoulder, lowering his voice. "She's my first grandchild, and I love her. God knows I do, but any name with the word grace disguised in it was *not* the right call for that one."

I laugh through my scold. “Daddy!”

“What? She’s awful. All she does is whine and bark orders at your sister and mother.” He takes one last pull at the empty drink. “Thanks, Sweet Pea. I really needed that.”

“Apparently.”

He looks me over. “You look beautiful, healthy. How are things?”

“Honestly, pretty shitty. Another break up with a guy I didn’t even like, and I got passed over for a promotion I deserved. Oh, and my car just kicked the bucket.”

“Gravity,” he reminds me.

“I know, and trust me, I’m feeling more thankful by the minute.” I glance at the spacious length of yard bordering the cliff rock past the edge of the deck, which is becoming blanketed by the rapidly falling snow.

“You missing Grandpa Joe?” My father and grandfather were the best of friends despite my father eloping with my mother when they were only nineteen. It was quite the scandal in this small town where they grew up before my parents moved to Nashville. And Triple Falls is small town in every sense. It seems very few secrets are kept here.

“I miss Joe all the time. He did things with me that your brother is too much of a computer geek to do. And don’t get me started on your brother-in-law.”

“That’s where I draw the line, Daddy. Thatch is a *saint*. Need I remind you that he married *Serena*. He’s too busy catering to his wife and kids to do much else. He also happens to be my favorite person in this family.”

“He married in.”

“Exactly.”

We both chuckle.

“Well, he’s hiding upstairs with your sister rather than helping me.”

“While you’re hiding from his daughter and playing family gossip.”

He harrumphs. “If I need a woman to call me out on my crap, I’ll go converse with your mother. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to it before she comes up with a list of unnecessary shit for me to do.” He hugs me briefly before opening a new box of iffy-looking lights to sift through.

“House looks phenomenal, Daddy. It’s going to be a great week.”

“You know what would be great?” He nods toward my empty glass. “You getting me more of that.”

“Not while you plan on using that death trap you think is a ladder. Seriously, Daddy, that thing is going to give out any second.”

“It’s as strong as an ox. It’s lasted all this time.”

“Case in point. I don’t trust it. I’ll go to the hardware store right now and grab something safer if you’ll stop using it.”

“She made it perfect, didn’t she?” He asks, ignoring my plea for his safety.

“You both did.”

Another shriek sounds from above, and we both look warily toward the house.

“I’ll be out here until dinner,” Dad grumbles under his breath, sorting through the box of lights before hoisting a set over his shoulder and heading back up the ladder. Ready for a refill, I step inside and come face to face with my niece, who already has my height matched.

“Hey, Auntie Whit!” Gracie wraps her arms around my waist, hugging the life out of me. “Grammy told me you were here!”

“Oh she did?”

“And I’m sooooo glad.”

“Are you now?” There’s always a catch. I see my niece and nephew often enough, and by often, I mean I don’t miss milestones and babysit at least twice a month. Gracie and I are close, and the aunt privilege makes me privy to pertinent information that I relay to my sister in very creative ways—making me a hero to my niece while keeping her safe from herself.

“I missed you,” she squeaks, her tone full of butter up.

“Missed you, too.”

“Hey,” she gives me a syrupy smile. “Can I borrow your phone for a minute?”

“Not a chance.”

The smile disappears just as quickly as it came, and the child frightens me with the demon morph to her voice when she speaks. “We’re stuck in this stupid cabin and no phones? I didn’t even want to come here!”

“Lord,” I hear my mom grumble from where she stands in the kitchen. I know it’s on the tip of her tongue to scold her granddaughter, but she’s holding back because she doesn’t want to start off the holiday being the bad guy.

And this is where I come in.

“Gracie, stop shrieking. You’re giving me a headache. And if you behave,” I bribe without hesitation, “I might let you be my glam squad. And by the way, I brought *everything* from my last shopping trip to Ulta for you to fool around with.” I lean in on a whisper. “Grammy has gone to a lot of trouble to make this fun for all of us. So, if you promise to keep your bitching to a minimum, I might even let you have a few things. Deal?”

I can see the gears turning as she mentally scans through the perks of my proposed compromise. “Okay. So, can I do your makeup *now*?”

“I was hoping you would. Go get it. It’s all in the red bag on the top of my suitcase.”

My sister walks into the den/Elvis museum where we stand negotiating, an inflatable king mattress primed for whomever my brother deemed important enough to occupy it. Gracie brushes past her mother wordlessly and defiantly before racing out of the room, through the kitchen, and down the hall toward the stairs.

“You’re finally here,” Serena sighs, eyes weary as she makes her way toward me. I pull her into my arms, and we stand and hug for several seconds as my sister fake cries into my shoulder. “I’m never having sex again, like ever.”

When we break our hug, she looks in the direction Gracie fled, voice lowered. “Why, Jesus, *why* did I listen to Thatch when he got all *thug love* the first time we had sex and was all, “you’re going to have my baby.”

We both burst into laughter, mine more due to surprise.

“*Thatch* said that?”

“Trust me, it was a rare moment,” she grumbles, “I’m starting to think I imagined it.” She glances around the room, my father’s shrine to the King of Rock and Roll.

“I feel sorry for the poor bastard stuck sleeping in here.”

“Seriously,” I say, eyeing the room. “This really is embarrassing. Glad I’m not bringing someone new into the mix this year. The more crap he buys, the harder it is to explain.”

“He brought it all from home, so he didn’t have to get rid of it.”

“Gotta love Dad.”

Just as I say it, Dad curses, his lower half and the ladder in our peripheral through one of the three large study windows. We both laugh when he peers through it to see if Mom heard him curse.

“Doing all right, Daddy?” Serena booms, so he’s able to hear her.

He gives us a thumbs up before he disappears from view.

Smiling, I turn back to Serena, giving her wide eyes. “Mom said Gracie got her period?”

“She did, and I have to be honest, at the moment, I can’t stand her. You might want to play buffer for her the next few days. I’m not sure I can abstain much longer from tossing her off the cliff. Please help me. You’re the only one she listens to.”

“I’ve got this. But first, where is my baby?”

“He’s napping. Can you believe he slept through that meltdown? He’s avoiding Gracie better than Dad is.”

“And my *other* baby?”

“Thatch just laid down. I think he’s got PTSD from the six-hour road trip turned eight—because kids.”

“Poor baby. That bad?”

I look her over in her typical oversized hoodie, leggings, and messy bun as she nods. We share the same blonde hair color and build, but Serena beats me by several inches in height. Other than that, it’s glaringly obvious that we’re sisters.

“Thatch has no idea how to talk to his daughter at the moment. I swear I saw him tear up in fear last night when I told him.” She leans in conspiratorially. “I’m going to go clean out the garage if that’s okay?”

Cleaning out the garage is code for adult-only activity.

“Go for it.”

“You said you didn’t want to be stuck babysitting while you’re here.” Her voice is mournful, and I immediately regret saying it. She’s worried enough Gracie is intolerable for everyone else.

“I was in a mood. I can handle it for a bit.”

“Sure you can handle her, *them*?”

“Girl, please, bye.”

“Good luck,” Mom mutters from the kitchen through the peek-through window into the den.

“She’s not that bad, Mom,” Serena scolds.

Silence.

“She’s not,” my sister defends, turning back to me. “She’s just a little high-strung.”

“She’s a wrecking ball. But I’ve got this. Now, can I wake him?”

Serena grins, knowing that my nephew is the only acceptable payment for distracting her kids to give her some ‘me’ time. “Sure, he’s been down long enough.” My niece greets me at the foot of the stairs just as I’m about to go up.

“Ready?”

“I’m going to get your brother up. I’ll be right back.”

She nods. “Okay, I’ll get set up.” I pull Gracie into my arms. The little girl I know vanishing day by day. “Merry Christmas,

baby girl.”

“Merry Christmas, Auntie Whit.” She’s got a mix of the blonde and some strawberry from her father. But she’s every bit a Collins girl already. Independent, forthright, and mouthy. Her mother’s brown eyes widen as she looks over at me.

“I have something to tell you.”

“Oh?” I feign surprise. Secrets don’t last minutes in this family, no matter who the confidant.

Her cheeks redden a little. “It’s a *woman* thing.”

“I’m intrigued. Can’t wait.” I pop her on the butt. “Give me ten.”

“K.”

She races to the dining table with my makeup arsenal as I take the stairs, following the grown man snore to the end of the hall. It amazes me just how fast men fall asleep as if they don’t have a worry in the world. Grammy used to say, give a man a slab of cement and he’ll find a way to make a bed out of it. I peek in on Thatch to see he’s completely out, mouth wide, his strawberry blond hair in desperate need of a cut. Aside from my sister, he’s one of my closest friends. They’ve been together so long that in a way, it feels like we grew up together. More than once—on especially bad days—he’s talked me off the ledge, not out of obligation but because he genuinely cares about me. Patient, kind, caring, devoted—Thatch set the standard for me on the husband front. Over the years, I’ve watched him morph from a passive boyfriend into a super husband. As much as my sister bitches about his antics, he’s one of the best humans I know. Tolerant to the point of sainthood. Not only that, he gifted me two of the people I love most in the world.

A room over, I see the pack and play and the baby who soundly sleeps inside it, and it’s all I can do to keep from snatching him into my arms. The mere sight of him stirs a love within me that borders obsession. From the minute he was born, he became the love of my life. Not only that, biased or not, he’s the most adorable baby I’ve ever seen. Bright-red strawberry hair, cheeks so big and so full, they impede his speech. I’m a sucker for his large green eyes, the only child in the Collin’s family to escape the brown. His perfect, pink-tinged mouth is shaped in a

tiny ‘o’. He’s dressed only in his diaper and wool socks due to the heat from the roaring fire below, which warms the upstairs of the cabin.

His pudgy little body is nothing but dents and rolls as he lays comatose. My heart swells unbearably as I stare down at him.

My sister had my dream baby.

Aunts aren’t supposed to pick favorites, but of all my nieces and nephews, the force with this one is too strong to ignore. He stirs a little as if he senses me, and his eyes flutter before he nestles further into the playpen. It’s then that the greed overtakes me. I gently lift him from where he sleeps, and he jerks before he settles into my chest as his scent—baby lotion—surrounds me. Unable to resist, I steal a kiss, and he sighs as if he knew it was coming. I can’t help the bounce of my chest as he smashes his eyes closed to try and get back to where he was in his dream, his light strawberry lashes fanning over his ridiculously full cheeks. “Now you, little lady killer, well, you are the greatest Christmas present a girl could ever ask for.”

I settle into the old rocker that my grandmother put in the room specifically to rock her great-grandchildren and gently press off the old carpet with my foot. Snow drifting heavily past the window, I soak in the moment. I get so few of these. Every time Peyton’s in my arms, it’s a bittersweet reminder that this is as close to parenthood as I’ll ever get.

My uterus was considered geriatric years ago, and last year I voluntarily retired my number. On my last birthday, I decided that if I managed to find a husband, the desire to parent has—for the most part—left me.

I always assumed forty was the cutoff date, but my gynecologist informed me that’s when things can get dicey and dangerous. Knowing my window was, *is* closing, I did nothing about it and am purposely letting the clock tick out.

Stupidly, and when I was most anxious to have a family, I never considered having a baby without a partner. In truth, I’ve never really had a partner I’d considered having a baby with, save *one*. Ironically, he was the opposite of the definition of a family man.

I've now accepted that any child in my life would be produced by my siblings—and that is enough. And it has been. Mostly. But every now and then, I get the feeling that I've missed something *big*, a rite of passage as a woman in the human experience.

When I hold Peyton in my arms, I feel I've missed nothing.

I pull off his sock and study the plump ridge on the top of his foot before running my finger over it. He jerks it away, and I giggle, murmuring into his hair. “Come on, little moo-moo, let Auntie see those Jersey Cow eyes. Let me see them.”

He roots into my neck, perfect pink lips agape as if he's milk drunk. I gently nudge him. “Wake up for me, baby boy. I need you to see me before your sister does my clown makeup and I scare you half to death.”

Unable to wake him without feeling a villain, I stare out the window at the falling snow, listening to the human noise below. My father with his staple gun just below us, my mother in the kitchen using her mixer while listening to Brenda Lee, and the sound of the garage door closing as my sister christens the old dusty boxes with a bit of Bob Marley.

For a brief second, I get a glimpse—a memory of pounding down the stairs on Christmas morning, seeing my grandparents in their rockers, their champagne glasses full as they greeted us while we screamed like banshees. Our parents sidled up next to them on the love seat, champagne glasses of their own in hand.

Clouded in the moment, I jerk back when blinding pain shoots from my eyeball to my temple, the squeaky voice of the culprit sounding out the name of the appendage he just damaged as I try to hold in my yelp. “Eyeeee,” Peyton squeals. Eye watering and blinking repeatedly, I laugh as the baby straightens in my lap and head butts my chin to situate himself before he stabs me again, “Mose, mough, cheen.” In pain but unable to resist, I squeeze him to me. “Hey baby boy, did you have a good nap?”

“Mep.”

“What?” I laugh out incredulous. “Did you say yep?”

He repeats the names of my features, completely unsatisfied he got no praise the first time around.

Typical man—and egomaniac.

“That’s right, baby. You’re sooo smart.”

“Whit, do it,” he instructs.

I nuzzle his neck, and he exhales his protest for me to get on with it. “Whit do it!”

“Okay, fine. So demanding.” I manage to wink out a soothing tear knowing my eye has to be as red as the little cherub’s hair. “I call this,” I press my finger to his forehead. “For-bender,” I drawl out, lowering my finger next to his eye, “eye winker,” I press my finger to his cheek, “Tom tinker, nose dropper, chin chomper, and *this* is your, “Ollie gollie, gollie.” He shrieks and laughs as I dig my fingers into his neck.

“Gain!”

“Kisses first.” He grips my face, his sharp little fingernails digging into my jaw just before delivering a slobbery kiss, and I soak it in as he covers me.

“Good kisses. Thank you.”

“Mep,” he says simply, wiggling to get out of my lap.

“No way, Jose,” I grip him tight to me as he makes pained grunts to show his displeasure at his capture. “Dow, dow,” he demands.

“Nope.”

“Mep,” he replies, making me laugh.

“You are soooo smart, Pey, Pey. Definitely didn’t get that from your mother.”

“I heard that,” Serena sounds up before she appears in the doorway. “You best get down there. Your glam squad is starting to irritate her grandmother.”

“She’s going to tell me she got her period. Any specifics I need to know?”

“Like what? Hey baby,” she walks over and runs her palm over Peyton’s head as he struggles to get out of my arms. “Have a good nap?”

“Mep,” he says, and we both crack up.

“When did this happen?”

“I don’t know where he got it, but I guess yes has been replaced.”

“I love it,” I say as he struggles in my arms for freedom. She rolls her eyes. “He wants down because he’s got things to do. He’s in his busy phase. Always *so* busy.”

“Mom-*may*,” Peyton grunts, “hewp.”

Shaking her head, Serena takes him and situates him on her hip.

“I’m so excited for him to open the workshop I have wrapped beneath the tree. I can’t wait to see him in nothing but a diaper and a tool belt.”

“Yeah? Cute. You didn’t have to do that.”

I grip Peyton’s flailing foot. “I’d let the kid have my car if he wanted it.”

“I know you would.”

“As much good as it will do him. It just died in the driveway.”

“Really?” A grimace. “Crap, sis, you’ve had some really horrible luck lately.”

“You think? It stopped being funny last night. The bombs seem to be appearing out of thin air before they drop. I think I’ve pissed my fairy godmother off somehow. All I can do now is wait for the next crap splatter.”

“And you broke up with, what was his name, Keith?”

“Kyle.”

“MOM-MAY!” Peyton grunts as she ignores his struggle in her arms.

“I knew you didn’t like him if *I* never met him.”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t even consider it a breakup, more like a one-night stand that lasted a few months because I had nothing better to do—literally and figuratively. I used him, objectified him for his huge,” I lean in so the baby doesn’t hear, “Dick.”

“Dick,” Peyton repeats, and I wince.

“No, dick, *Pey Pey, penis*,” Serena flashes me a death glare.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. He’ll forget all about it in a little while.”

When her gaze lingers on me, I decipher the look. I know that look, and I despise it. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Right.” Lifting from the chair, I reclaim my nephew from her arms.

“But,” she speaks up behind me as I make my way downstairs, “if you want my opinion—”

“Nope,” I say, rounding the staircase.

“Mope,” the baby repeats, and I kiss his cheek. “The car is yours, kid.”

“It’s just that if you would get picky, you might narrow it down.”

I pause at the top of the stairs and address my nephew. “Mommy just called me a hoe.”

“Mep,” he agrees as I do my best to smooth his wayward hair down.

“I did not. It’s just when you waste your time with guys like that, knowing it won’t go anywhere, you lose time with someone that could be worth it.”

“I’ve been out there *far longer* than you.” I glance back at her, pausing at the top of the stairs. “Maybe I’m over the whole concept. Maybe this is my life. Career woman, aunt, daughter, sister. That’s a lot. That’s plenty.”

“I’m not saying it’s not.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“Don’t go nuclear, Whit.”

“Then don’t go there,” I warn.

“I just don’t want you to be alone anymore. It’s been three Christmases since you even brought a boyfriend home. There’s still time for—”

“Stop. You bitch about being married all the time.”

“Yeah, but—.”

“You know what’s amazing, sis?” I stare up at her from a few stairs down as her restless baby wiggles in my arms. “I get to go home at night, kick off my heels, eat whatever *I want* for dinner in yoga pants, do the dishes or don’t before I binge whatever I desire, answering to *no one* or worrying about whether or not a soul will hear me fart.”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“Because I don’t believe you. You’ve been married, with Thatch, *forever*, and you’ve *never* farted in front of the man?”

“I don’t fart.”

“Liar.”

“Mep,” the baby agrees.

“I’m just saying. You’re not helping your chances by playing musical beds with idiots. It’s like you don’t even care anymore.”

“You know,” my cheeks flame in anger. “You make it hard to be honest with you when you act like this. I have moments. If I can’t share those moments with you—without you throwing it up in my face—you’ll lose my confidence.”

“Don’t get all bitchy. It’s just...I love you.”

“Then stop harping on me. It’s Christmas. Not to mention you tell me all the time how lucky I am to be obligation-free, and for the reasons I just told you. You’re always yapping about marriage and kids and being stuck with the same penis, day in and out.”

“Dick,” Peyton says.

“No dick, Pey Pey, *penis*,” Serena corrects before glancing over her shoulder and turning back to me, her eyes narrowed. “What the hell!? What if Thatch heard you?”

“Sorry. But stop acting like my marital status is a problem, and I *know* you discuss it with Thatch. He tried to set me up with one of his buddies. Ewww. Not to mention you’re the one with a nasty case of FOMO lately.”

“I don’t have fear of missing out.”

“You so do.”

“What exactly am I missing out on? You’re practically a bitter old maid now.”

“And you’re bored.” We stare off for a few seconds, our collective nerves raw from the truth.

I speak first. “Are we seriously fighting already?”

“No,” she sighs. “Sorry, I just know you well enough to know it’s hurting you.”

“Just like I know that you and Thatch are in a rough patch. It doesn’t mean we need to hash it out this minute.” Reluctantly, I pass the baby to her. “I’m okay, Serena. Really.”

“I don’t want you to give up.”

“And I just want you to *wake up* and realize how shitty—not to mention *hard*—your life would be *without* Thatch.”

“Auntie Whit! It’s been like twenty minutes, gah!” My niece calls from the dining room table.

I sigh. “Let’s just try to have fun, okay? You were supposed to cheer me up, remember?”

“Okay,” she agrees with a sigh. She nudges my shoulder. “Sorry. Love you.”

“Love you.”

We reach the bottom of the stairs, and she gives me the side-eye. “Had to go there with your perks of freedom list, didn’t you?”

“You started it,” I grin.

“I *don’t* fart.”

CHAPTER FIVE



“Almost done,” Gracie assures me, pulling out yet another brush. “It’s darker than I wanted.”

“Which color? I’m pretty sure you used all twelve in the pallet. Ever heard the saying less is more?”

“No, what’s that mean?”

“Ahh, bubble butt, it means less can sometimes make more of a statement.”

“Oh.”

I pull one of the compacts with a mirror to check my reflection.

“Not yet!” She sticks out her tongue as if solving a math problem while dragging the loaded brush across my face.

“You don’t have to cake it on, Gracie. The lighting isn’t good in here. I’m sure there’s plenty on the brush.”

“Gah, trust me, Auntie. One more.”

“Gracie!” Serena calls, “grandma wants you to clear the table off and set it for dinner.”

“One more minute!” She shrieks in my face.

I lift pleading eyes to my sister as she walks into the room and gets a first look at me. It's then we use our sister telepathy.

How bad is it?

So bad. So very, very, bad.

Draining my second whiskey and coke, I shrug—because who cares—before I attack Gracie and pull her into my arms. “Enough already. I’m sure it’s perfect. We’re done, love. Clear the table and help your grandma.”

“Okay, but don’t take it off until we take a picture.”

“What are you saying? I’m not washing it off. I’m keeping this look all night.”

She beams at me. “Promise?”

“Promise, promise. Now pick something.” I gesture to the pile of makeup.

She sorts through my stash before she confiscates a thirty-dollar highlighter and hugs me. Having no car payment has afforded me a hell of a lot of retail therapy. Priorities will have to change. For now, I enjoy the moment and Gracie’s happiness.

“Thanks, Auntie Whit.”

“Welcome, baby girl.”

Gracie and Serena disappear into the kitchen just as the doorbell rings.

“I’ve got it.” I prance through the living room, my spirits lifted from the booze and making my niece happy. I hear the cursing on the other side of the door just before I open it to see the beet-red face of my brother a second before he steps in the entryway and releases an armful of bags with a thunderous thud.

“Well, that explains why you didn’t use your key. Hey, brother.”

Brenden groans in frustration, eyeing the luggage rack he’s just unloaded at our feet. “Six days, six days, and she packed half the fucking house. This isn’t even a quarter of it.” Brenden is the tallest in the family at six-foot-four and towers above me. He takes more after my father in the looks department. His brown

eyes are darker, and he's the only brunette of the three of us. His glare leaving the luggage, he looks down at me, eyes widening.

"Jesus, what happened to your face?" Without giving me a chance to reply, he pulls me into a bear hug. Though we're Irish twins and he's only eleven months older than me, he's always been the overly opinionated, overbearing older brother who thinks one-syllable words are problem solvers.

"Your niece has decided to be my glam squad for the week."

"I pity you, and I've missed you, sis."

"Same."

He reiterates his statement by hugging me a little tighter, and I hug him back, catching the melodic and gently coaxing voice of his wife as she gently doles out orders to my five-year-old niece, Conner.

"It's good to be here," Brenden says, some of the tension leaving him before he releases me, and I glance past his shoulder. "So how was the dri—" I freeze, blinking repeatedly. Until this moment, I'd completely forgotten about Brenden's plus one who just so happens to be walking up the stairs behind him, several bags hanging from his arms, a collapsible high-chair in his grip. Shocked by the sight of the stranger, it takes a few seconds to register when his eyes lift—crystalline blue—his face, so familiar. Brenden turns and grins as the guy comes into full view at the top of the steps, and my jaw goes slack.

"*Hey, you,*" the voice is smoother, deeper, much deeper, but there's no mistaking it when he flashes his megawatt smile.

Oh. My. God.

"Eli?"

Brows rising, my brother looks between the two of us. "You two know each other?"

Without hesitation, Eli steps into the house, looking every bit as mouth-watering as he did the first time I laid eyes on him my junior year of college. Well, then he was *naked*. But it's him, unmistakably *him*. Eli Welch.

When my first love steps into the entryway, he towers a full foot taller than me as I greedily drink him in. Thick, wavy, dirty

blond hair the color of a halo, but without the brass. Perfectly symmetrical facial features, chiseled cheekbones, a sleek jaw, and lush lips. Further down, a muscular runner's build is only enhanced by his dress—dark denim, a thin designer sweater, and bomber jacket. The years have been gloriously kind to him. The only signs of age are tiny wrinkles next to his twinkling icy blue eyes. His grin deepens to level sinister—an old but familiar, “I got you”—dancing in his gaze just before he announces to my brother just *how well* we know each other.

“We dated for a while in college.” He sets some of the luggage down as I step back, gawking.

Eight months. We dated for eight months my junior year of college...until he ripped my beating heart right out of my fucking chest. His voice covers me in our shared past as I try to wrap my head around what's happening.

“It's been a long time. How are you, Whitney?”



“Are you fucking kidding me?” I screech at my brother's back as he unloads an armful of luggage in his designated upstairs bedroom.

“Sorry, when I asked him what his Christmas plans were, I didn't think to ask him if he dated my sister over, what, twenty years ago?”

“*Seventeen*, and you should have.”

“You're overreacting.”

“Am I? *Am I?*” I am. I totally am. And I'm pretty sure everyone can hear me.

I lower my voice and step around the bed, so Brenden's forced to face me. “We've had sex.” My brother grimaces at that admission. “Dirty, *raunchy*, college sex. Experimental sex. Do you remember that? No, because you've been married for a *hundred years*.”

“Shut up.”

“He hurt me,” I say under my breath. “He’s an original player, and he hurt me—*badly*. Do you even care? I’m your sister!” I’m still screeching, just as horrifically as Gracie was when I arrived—and realizing it, I do my best to calm my racing heart. Eli Welch is downstairs.

Eli!

“Of course, I care, but it was seventeen years ago. I think it’s time to let go of old grudges. What am I supposed to do, go down and tell him, ‘Hey, you boned and crushed my sister in college—and she’s still bitter about it—so you’ll have to spend Christmas alone?’”

“Yes.”

Brenden begins to unpack a diaper bag. “Not happening.”

“It’s what he deserves.”

“He’s a good guy, a *great* guy, actually.”

“I hate you so much right now.”

“He’s the closest thing I have to a friend these days, and I think you might be surprised to find—”

I cover my ears. “La la la la la.”

“He’s obviously matured far more than you. You need to let it go and not make things weird.”

“Make things weird? Make. Things. *Weird*?! You invited my college ex-boyfriend to our family Christmas!”

“Technically, all he is now is *my* coworker. He’s a consultant, which means he’s not my employee, which makes our friendship legit. What can I say? He loves me for me.”

“You’re making jokes? You’ve got jokes! You’re the worst brother ever!”

“We all have to have goals.”

“I can’t believe this.” I shake my head.

“Well, if you’re wanting to get even with him in the ‘eat your heart out sense,’ then you might want to rethink the makeup. You look like a bedazzled geisha.”

“Go straight to hell.”

“That’s the Christmas spirit, sis. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a diaper to change, a wife to appease, and I’m sure Dad needs my help with *something*.”

“Don’t expect me to entertain him, Brenden.”

“I’m sure you’re doing a good job of that already. When’s the first drag show?”

“I’ll get you for this. Bet on it.”

“Great, looking forward to it,” he says, unbuttoning his sleeves and rolling them up just as my sister-in-law, Erin, walks in with my nephew, Wyatt, and places him in Brenden’s arms. Unable to help it, I soften as Wyatt gives me a shy smile in recognition before burying his face in Brenden’s chest. I walk over and lay my hand on his back. “Hey, baby boy. Wow, you’re getting *so* big.” He wiggles in his father’s arm when the smell hits me, and I grin as my brother’s nostrils flare. “Keep those stink bombs coming for Auntie Whit, would you?”

Erin laughs as I turn to greet her, pulling her into a hug. “Been too long, sister.”

“We’ve missed you.”

Erin is five years younger than me but doesn’t look a day over twenty-five. “You look incredible, which is surprising since you married *horribly*. Where’s my niece?”

“Grandma claimed her already.”

“Crap.”

“I’ve really missed you,” she says with a light laugh before the trace of sadness in her tone catches up to her expression. Brenden moved them all from Nashville to Charlotte just after Wyatt was born. It’s been a rough adjustment for Erin leaving her friends and family behind. She seems relieved to be here, and I can’t help but give her sympathetic eyes.

“Still getting used to Charlotte?”

Erin eye’s my brother cautiously, and I know I’ve hit a nerve. “It’s coming along pretty good.”

We stare off in silent communication that conveys we’ll have a *real talk* about it later. “So, you dated Eli?”

“Yes, and it ended *badly*. At least for me.” I glare at Brenden’s profile.

She scrutinizes my brother accusingly for an admission of guilt, and I love her more for it. I’ve been blessed tremendously in the in-law department. Half the time, I get along with my sibling’s spouses better than I do my siblings. Erin lifts a brow at Brenden when he remains mute and shrugs with Wyatt in his arms, unsurprisingly using his son as a shield from the both of us.

“I didn’t know,” he says adamantly. “It never came up.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Erin declares. “I can *always tell* when he’s lying.”

“Oh yeah?” Brenden taunts. “How’s that?”

“What kind of idiot would that make me to tell you?” She leans in on a whisper. “He swallows and clenches his ass cheeks.”

We share a laugh and aim our scolding gazes his way as he turns and lays the baby on the bed. “I will not be bullied by you two. All I want is Mom’s lasagna and a beer. Is that too much to ask?”

Erin nudges me and lifts her chin in Brenden’s direction as he unbuttons Wyatt’s onesie. “Babe?” Erin lifts her voice to her husband.

“Yeah?”

“You’re looking a little tired today. Sure you only had one beer at Santo’s last night with the boys?”

“Yeah, just one.”

I, to my absolute horror, zero in on my brother’s ass to see it draw tight and cringe. “Thanks a lot,” I scold Erin. “I’ll *never* get that visual out of my head.”

She laughs. “Let me freshen up, and I want a drink and the details.”

“Details of what?” Serena says, joining us in the bedroom, her eyes sparkling as she greets Erin with a hug and claps my brother on the back before bending to greet Wyatt. “Hey baby, thank God you look like your mother.”

“I can’t win,” Brenden coos to Wyatt. “It’s a coven.”

“Watch it,” Erin scolds, turning to Serena. “My husband has brought your sister’s ex-boyfriend to Christmas.”

“What?” Serena says, turning to me with wide eyes. “Which ex?”

“Eli.”

She sorts through her mental Rolodex before her eyes bulge. “*College Eli?*”

“Yep,” I say, crossing my arms and narrowing my eyes at Brenden, who refuses to look at me.

“Brother, why would you do a thing like that?”

“I didn’t know!” He explodes in sudden hostility, lifting his hands helplessly after discarding Wyatt’s dump diaper.

“Seriously. You don’t remember that entire summer Whit came home, stayed in her sweats, barely bathed, didn’t go out?”

“Can’t say that I do. You forget I wasn’t living at home then.”

“He does,” Erin says, her eyes trained on her husband’s ass cheeks, “and he remembers it well.” Brenden lifts a warning gaze to his wife.

“Fine, I do remember, but I swear I didn’t know it was my *Eli.*”

“Your Eli?” I scoff.

“We’ve been working together for nearly two months, long hours. We got close fast. It’s not like we braid each other’s hair yet, or I know his sign.”

“He’s a Capricorn,” I mutter. “And you never mentioned your sisters to him?”

“In passing, but not in detail, we really don’t talk about family.”

“I’m sure,” I mutter dryly, and all three heads turn my way. “He’s anything but a family man.”

Brenden sighs. “You’re no authority on him seventeen years after the fact. He’s a nice guy, respectable, and too old to fit the serial killer profile. I practically had to break his arm to get him

to stop by on Thanksgiving after the *big* dinner, so it was a surprise when he said he had no plans for Christmas and agreed to come. The guy's been working stupid crazy hours since he moved from Chicago, and from what I can tell, he has absolutely no one to spend Christmas with. Be easy on him."

"So, did he pull the orphan card on you too?"

"Whitney!" Serena admonishes. "That's terrible."

"What?" I shrug. "I'm not a good person right now, and I'm owning it. Besides, that's the card he played to throw me off my guard before he slithered in and—"

"Showed you his baby snake?" Brenden snorts.

"Keep it up, brother," I warn, my tone enough to temporarily pause his movement and mute him. "You deserve what's coming."

Just as I say it, a small spray shoots up from beneath Brenden as Wyatt soaks his shirt. Erin, Serena, and I burst into laughter.

"That a boy, Wyatt," I smirk as Brenden sighs.

"Witches, son. I'm telling you."

Erin speaks up as Brenden glances over at the three of us, his eyes weary, posture defeated. "I can't speak for college Eli, but current Eli seems to be a really nice guy. And not bad looking."

"Nope, we hate him," Serena declares. "Not a chance. I missed him when he got here. Where is this asshat?"

"Dad's showing him to his room. And don't even think about it," Brenden warns.

"I'm going in," Serena says, pushing up her hoodie sleeves which instills a fear in me. I grip my sister's arm. Even I know sending her in is going too far. "Don't you dare," I clip. "I've already made an ass of myself."

"Correct," Brenden mutters as Erin scowls at his profile. Brenden lifts his face heavenward, his voice a weak plea. "Help me. Someone, help me."

"You can't stop me," Serena taunts, "If he came into the lion's den knowing you were Brenden's sister, he's fair game for hazing."

Serena scrutinizes Brenden, the question none of us have voiced yet hanging in the air as she plucks it and fires at him.

“Do you have any family pictures in your office?”

“Just of Erin and the kids.”

“What about at home, in plain sight?”

Erin speaks up. “There’s one in the family room.” She flashes me a grin. “Thanksgiving last year, you look *really good* in it, too.” Erin winks as Serena turns to me, her eyes morphing into a creepy sort of crazy, like a deranged Sherlock with his first clue, but *scarier*. “Then he’s got an agenda.”

The darkening look in her eyes has me backpedaling.

“Serena, listen to me, don’t pull your older sister crap. I got freaked out. I’m fine. It took me by surprise is all. It *was* a long time ago.”

“We’ll see,” she retorts, wetting her lips like a psycho.

“Seriously, let it go. I have already, see?” I show her all my teeth—she fires back with a Finding Nemo shark-toothed smile as I begin to panic.

Oh, shit.

The thing about the Collins family is, we can rip each other to shreds and get over it. It’s par for the course, but if *any outsider* messes with or hurts any one of us individually, they may have well signed their own death warrant. It’s an unspoken truth—which makes Eli a target. I can only hope he can move as fast as he did in college.

In an odd and gravity-defying move, Serena spins toward the door on one foot, and I charge out of the room behind her, hearing Brenden’s fear-filled whisper to Erin. “This isn’t good.”

“No shit, brother,” I call back toward the room, chasing my rabid sister as she breaks for the stairs. “Maybe I’ll invite crazy, drunk, no eff’s given *Tasha* for New Year’s.”

I sense the shift in the air in the bedroom above us and dive for Serena on the stairs just as Erin pipes up. “Who’s *Tasha*?”

Brenden’s voice booms out of the bedroom. “You’re dead, Whit.”

Pulling Serena into a headlock, she fights against me as I clamp her mouth with my hand and call up to him. “Bring it on, brother!”

CHAPTER SIX



That went as well as I expected—*seventeen years later*. From what I can tell beneath the clown makeup—the years have been good to her. Better than good. Evidently, Whitney still gets vocal when she’s pissed, hence the slightly muffled screeches sounding from above.

“Brenden tells me you two work together.” Allen leads me through the bottom floor of the cabin, where I dart my eyes around, taking it all in. Floor-to-ceiling windows provide a continuous view of the surrounding branch-laden trees, giving way to a clear shot of the mountain top just across the street. “Yes, Sir. I moved back to North Carolina from Chicago a few months ago.”

“Oh,” he says, stopping just short of the kitchen. “What made you come back?”

“Honestly, I thought I never would, but as it turns out, I missed North Carolina. Went to college in Chapel Hill.”

“A Tarheel, huh?”

“Yessir.”

“You’re in good company here. And there’s no place quite like home,” he says, leading me into the study.

“Wish I could claim that. I actually grew up in LA,” I correct. “My parents moved us here when I was thirteen. I never missed living there.”

The minute I hit the threshold of the room, I pause and see nothing but...*The King*. Across from the doorway stands a life-sized cardboard cut-out of a slimmer Vegas Elvis, with a plastic lei around his neck. The rest of the room is hosed down with shelves upon shelves of Elvis memorabilia.

“Hope you like Elvis. You’ll be rooming with him.”

“Who’s the fan?”

Allen lifts his chin with pride. “Not just a fan, he was *a family friend*. My grandparents lived across the street from his parents in Memphis. They were great friends. My Mom was there the day he moved his parents to Graceland. I was just a baby.”

“That’s awesome.”

I set my duffle down and look around with a mix of fascination and fear. Whitney never mentioned when we dated that her father was an Elvis fanatic. A small stack of trophies—no doubt impersonation prizes—line the top of one of the shelves, a prideful display.

“I see you competed.”

Allen grins, nothing but pride in his eyes. “I did for a while.” He picks one of the trophies up and hands it to me. “When I won first—in *Vegas* of all places—I figured I should hang it up while I was on top.” I study the golden Elvis, knees bent in one of his signature poses, and appreciate the trophy for an appropriate amount of time before I hand it back. “That’s cool.”

When another shriek sounds from upstairs, it’s all I can do to hide my grin.

“I wonder what she’s going on about,” Allen mumbles. Another shriek has me cloaking my laughter with the clear of my throat.

“Sorry about that,” Allen offers sheepishly. “Must be a full moon coming tonight or something because the women in this family seem to be climbing the walls.”

Whitney's most definitely got her claws out, no doubt due to my unexpected appearance. Her over-glossed jaw had dropped the second she realized it was me. I didn't at all expect a warm reception, but I didn't expect to feel such a hit of nostalgia in those few seconds when our eyes locked over her brother's shoulder. It's clear she still harbors ill-feeling towards me due to the way we ended. This week should be interesting. If anything, I'll give her a long-overdue apology. She has every right to any lingering resentment against me after the way things ended between us. Allen glances down at the blowup mattress. "The bed should be comfortable. Sorry about the bedroom situation, my kids keep multiplying and well," his smile is full of pride, "I can't say I don't love it."

"It's perfect. I appreciate you having me."

"The more the merrier. I mean that."

"Thank you, Sir."

"*Allen*. Well..." he glances around, "I'll leave you to it." He does just that as the noise from above mutes to an eerie silence. If I still know Whitney at all, that's scarier than the shrieking. The truth is, I doubt I know her at all anymore. Seventeen years is a long time, a lifetime. People can change drastically in a day, let alone nearly two decades. Though the greeting at the door made it seem more like a blink when she lifted her brown doe eyes to mine.

What the fuck are you doing, Eli?

Selfish curiosity.

I originally planned to spend Christmas unpacking the stacked boxes in my rental—to finally make it feel more like a home—but when Brenden invited me, I accepted, surprising us both. I could bullshit myself and say it had nothing to do with the family photo I spotted in his living room a week ago, but I'd be lying. Instead of asking him about her, I cyber-stalked her for an hour, maybe two. It's a mystery, even to me, why I just didn't confess my connection to her and outright ask him about her.

It was a pussy move.

The truth is, the last week isn't the only time I've looked her up or thought about her over the years, not by a longshot. For me, she was the one woman who never really left my thoughts. Over

the years, some of the memories have faded. There's been a lot of spacing between personal relationships, but Whitney? Unforgettable.

Even so, encroaching on a family's *Christmas* due to selfish curiosity is completely out of character for me. And maybe that's why I accepted, to jump off the edge of my comfort zone.

I walk over to one of three large study windows and check out the view. Tall trees cluster along the ridge, forming thick woods covering the freshly dusted cliff rock, the snow steadily coming down. The den is spacious and cozy, housing a worn-in leather couch, a large desk, and endless shelves of Elvis. Even so, there's more than enough room for the king-sized mattress I'll be sleeping on. The walls are darkly stained wood giving it that authentic cabin feel. I have to admit, even amongst cluttered memorabilia—and aside from the lack of a door for privacy—it's not a bad setup. The house itself is unbelievably decorated, making it picturesque for the holiday.

I can't remember the last time I spent a Christmas with *anyone* or actually looked forward to any holiday. At this point, I've engrained in myself to ignore they exist, though Whitney made that impossible for me the night she burst into my life.

The crash of my bathroom door has me looking out of the glass shower to see two girls, one dressed as a sexy... bee? The other a scantily dressed devil rushing toward the toilet.

"Oh, my glodddd," Satan exclaims just before a wave of projectile vomit spews out of her, narrowly making the mark. The putrid smell of regurgitated alcohol fills the air and my steaming shower, as the bee—a petite blonde with killer legs accentuated by yellow and black knee-high's and a scrap of fabric too short to be considered a skirt—bends to reveal a shot of ass and the hint of a black thong. There are bee antennae strapped to her head, covering the top of her angelic locks. Fixed on the sight of her toned thighs and pert ass, I make quick work of rinsing as the no-skirt Bee speaks.

"I told you not to pound that mystery juice. You have no idea who made it."

"Just hold my hair, Whitney!"

Whitney. I like it. And I like the view she's gracing me with a lot more. I wait for some sort of acknowledgment from either of them that they're in an occupied bathroom with a naked guy and running water, but neither seems to be my level of alert.

"Courtesy flush, please," I sound up a second before I cut off the shower and open the sliding glass door. Surprised brown eyes fly to mine in the mirror before they slowly lower and linger. I stand there, dripping and naked, giving her ample time to get a look—because it's only fair—before she finally lifts her gaze to mine.

"S-sorry. I d-didn't realize...t-the music is so loud...she drank too much of that hot pink punch, and it hit her all at once, and all the other doors were locked." Still holding her friend, she lifts her eyes back to my reflection. A smirk playing on her lips, she flushes the toilet just as the girl wretches again—thankfully, it's dry. I reach for my towel and obstruct her view. "Looks serious."

"That punch is strong."

"It's Pink Flamingo."

"Well, it's lethal."

"Looks like it." I don't miss the flare of her eyes as I step out and begin toweling off.

"Ob by glod, it's on my costume. This is bad. This is so bad."

"I'll clean up the mess, but I think she had pretty good aim," Whitney offers in sincere apology as the devil again dry heaves. "I'm so sorry."

I nod towards the counter. "Don't worry about it. Mind handing me my briefs?"

"Uh, sure." She plucks them from the counter and holds them out to me. I drop the towel and take them as she turns to fully face me, getting another eye full. I can't help the lift of my lips.

"You all done? Am I free to dress?"

"Sure." No shame. I can't help my smile. She's clearly buzzed from the rum concoction and unapologetic in her perusal, which I like, a lot. I then decide there's nothing sexier than a bold girl.

"We'll be out of your way in a minute...she can usually handle her liquor a little better. Thanks for being so nice about

this... ”

“Eli,” I say. “I’ll leave a sweatshirt for her on the bed.”

“Whitney,” she points to herself, which I find adorable.

“I heard.”

“I appreciate you.”

“Funny, I find myself appreciating you, too.”

“Please tell me you’re not picking up a dude while I’m puking,” the devil pipes up from beneath her.

Whitney laughs, and the sound increases my pulse as I head into my bedroom.

“I really should get back to this.”

“If you don’t mind, lock the door from the inside when you’re done. I have a key.”

“Why didn’t you lock it before you got in the shower?”

I pull some jeans out of my dresser—which sits against the wall just outside the bathroom door—and pull them on. “I usually don’t. Most people have the decency not to enter a closed bedroom door.”

The devil groans and manages to get to her knees, holding her stomach. Whitney leaves her there and walks to the edge of the bathroom, leaning against the frame as I button my jeans and break our stare off by pulling on a hoodie.

“So, then this is your house? Your party?”

“I’m one of four that live here, and definitely not my fucking party for this very reason. I find gifting devils and bees cups full of liquor very dangerous.”

“Cute.”

I toss a clean Tarheels sweatshirt on the bed and nod towards the door. “See you down there?”

She frowns. “I better get her home.”

I nod as another groan sounds behind her and take a step forward, crowding her at the door. Hovering at least a foot above her, I force her gaze up. Her tits press together due to her stance,

lips glossy and inviting, while my appreciation for bees only grows. I playfully flick one of her antennae.

“Why a bee?”

“Why not?”

We share a slow-building smile, and I turn, take the hoodie off the bed and hand it to her. “Guess I’ll see you around then, Whitney.”

“See you, Eli.” She plucks the sweatshirt from my hands. “Happy Halloween, and thanks.”

“He-wo,” the voice breaks through my memory as I scan the room for the source and manage to catch a spike of bright strawberry hair sticking just above the monstrous mattress. I step around to see a chunky baby with huge green eyes gazing back at me curiously, his hand lifted at his hip, opening and closing in greeting.

“Hey there,” I say softly, so I don’t scare him. His sweatshirt reads, I love Ta Ta’s, and I can’t help my chuckle. “Looks like we have something in common. I’m Eli. What’s your name?”

“Lie,” he repeats, his arms shooting next to his head before he starts to fist them open and closed. “Up. Up.”

“You want me to pick you up?”

“Mep,” he replies. The kid is fucking adorable, his cheeks ridiculously full. I walk over to where he stands and scoop him up. “So, I wonder who you belong to.”

“Lie!” The kid repeats, his arm going around my neck, his hand latching to my throat in a sort of buddy hug. My chest warms at the gesture. This kid has clearly never met a stranger.

“Eli,” I correct, as he leans in and studies me, our noses close to touching. A second later, a pain shoots through my head as he blasts his words. “Eye. Eye. Tom tink, gollie,” he exclaims, stabbing at my face before shoving his fingers into my neck.

I can’t help my laugh, knowing this is some nursery rhyme I’m not privy to. “I’m guessing you’re the sister’s kid?”

“You guessed right,” a shrewd voice replies a second before a blonde, who is unmistakably Whitney’s sister, appears in the doorway. Same eye color, similar features, and a look of

suspicion that lets me know she knows exactly who *I* am. Glancing back at the baby, it becomes clear he's been used as a decoy and an excuse to grill me. Her name escapes me as she rakes me from head to foot and then back up again.

Serena.

And Serena has just used her adorable toddler as leverage to investigate me further.

“Mo-may,” the toddler stabs me in the neck, “Lie.”

The little man introduces us as she not so subtly inspects me from where she stands at the doorway.

“Serena, right?”

I can practically hear the duel whistle of the old west as a mentally induced tumbleweed rolls between us.

Her fingers twitch at her sides, and I fail to hide my smile. Serena is the person Whitney's closest to in the world, and it's apparent I'm not going to meet the softer side of her anytime soon.

“Did you know that Whitney was Brenden's sister before you got here?”

A loaded question, and one I'm not prepared to answer because if I do, it will no doubt satisfy a number of questions whirling around in her head. Answers that Whitney has a right to first if she so desires them. Right now, if I say I knew—which I did—she'll then think I have an agenda, and to a small degree, I do. Thankfully, my new buddy distracts us both. Breath hits my ear just before the baby leans in on a whisper. “No dick, Pey Pey, *penis*.”

I burst out laughing as Serena sighs, her pale cheeks flushing a little as she walks over and takes her son from my arms. “As usual, perfect timing, kid.”

I can't help but smooth my hand over his hair before she gets him out of arm's reach. “What's his name?”

“Peyton,” she says, running a hand over his huge cowlick to no avail. The unruly hair sticks right back up. “I'm guessing he looks like your husband?”

“Nice try, *Lie*, but I want an answer.”

“Can we just skip this standoff and go straight into the ‘getting along because it’s *Christmas*’ phase?”

Her eyes narrow. “Why? Are you afraid to answer?”

“Not afraid. But it was a long time ago, Serena. I’m sure Whitney—”

“Hey, you,” a pointed voice interrupts as a woman steps into the den behind Serena, the resemblance again uncanny. Whitney’s mother, Ruby. Of all the siblings, Whitney looks most like her. She steps in front of her daughter as if to shield me. “You must be Eli.” I hold out my hand, and she shakes her head a second before pulling my six-foot-two into her tiny five-foot frame. Paralyzed by the unexpected gesture, I stand frozen in her arms a second before I hug her back.

“Call me Ruby. It’s so nice to meet you, sweetheart. My son has spoken so highly of you. We’re so happy to have you with us.” Glancing over her shoulder, I meet the narrowing eyes of Serena just as she’s stabbed in the neck with chubby fingers. “Gollie, Mo-may.”

Serena plays her part and overreacts to being tickled. “Let’s go clip your nails before *someone* loses an eye.”

My first threat, *beautiful*.

Serena’s smile for her son is replaced with a warning scowl for me before she disappears down the hall. Ruby pulls back from our hug and eyes the room with obvious embarrassment. “I’ve been begging the man for nearly twenty years to box this shit up or sell it. Instead, he brings it to my parent’s house and turns my father’s den into his trophy room. Please know I am—the entire family—is *very* embarrassed by this. Dinner is in twenty. I hope you like lasagna.”

“Love it.”

“Great. There’s a box of booze sitting on the wet bar. Help yourself. And don’t let Serena scare you. She’s mostly *bark* and usually cries about it after.”

“Thank you for having me.”

She nods. “Of course. The more the merrier.” She swallows, and I know what’s coming. It always does this time of year. “Can I ask you—”

“My parents died when I was nineteen. No siblings and no other relatives I have anything to do with.”

Sympathetic brown eyes scour me. “I’m so sorry.” A small bout of silence ensues before the inevitable next question, one that’s been added over the years as I’ve aged.

“So, you never married?”

“No, ma’am. I’m a career man.”

“I see.” Her tone is laced with a hint of what looks like pity. “Well, again, happy to have you with us.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Collins.”

“Ruby.”

“Thank you, Ruby.”

She turns to leave and pauses at the door. “You know, Whitney turned into a career woman as well. I always thought she would have a family, so did Allen, but to our utter shock, she never married, no children. Seems you two have something in common after *all these years*.”

Before I get a chance to respond, she disappears from the doorway.

She knows.

Of course, *she knows*. All mothers know and engrain the name of the men that break their daughter’s hearts into memory.

I’m *so fucked*.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Seated at the table after a hushed argument with my sister on *ex-etiquette* and the fact that I refused to take off my drag makeup because I promised my niece I wouldn't, I drain the last of my drink and glance around the dinner table. Dad at the head, my mother at his side, Brenden and Erin next to her, my niece, Conner in a booster, and Wyatt in an identical high-chair next to Peyton's. Gracie sits next to Serena, who's been eyeing Eli since Mom rang the dinner bell. And then there's Eli, who's no doubt been strategically placed across from me.

In other words, I'm front row in the seventh circle of hell.

"So, Eli," my sister draws out, pulling attention to our side of the table, including Thatch, who eyes her in warning. "Brenden says you moved from Chicago. What were you doing there?"

"A lot of this and that," Eli replies without hesitation, passing the salad bowl to Brenden as I stab at my lasagna, refusing to meet his gaze, which I feel on me briefly before he turns to her. "I ran my own business out there and sold it before I moved back to North Carolina."

"He grew up in LA," my Dad adds. "Had the good sense to school out here. A Tarheel like you, Sweet Pea."

"You don't say," I mumble as Dad addresses Eli.

“I went to LA once to compete. I’m sorry to say, I wasn’t impressed.”

“No offense taken,” Eli says with a grin.

“Why did you sell?” Thatch asks.

“I was tired of the responsibility. I wanted to get back into the innovative side, and being a business owner got in the way.”

“Huh,” Serena remarks. “Too much responsibility?”

“I did what I set out to do,” Eli replies easily, dodging her obvious jab. Serena ignores the murder in my eyes as I blaze it along her profile.

“What did you set out to do?” Mom asks.

“Easy guys, the man just got here,” Brenden cuts in, his eyes volleying around the table. “Let him get a bite in before you singe his jolly old sack.”

“It’s okay,” Eli says, turning to Mom. “Create, corner the market, make a little money.”

Brenden coughs. “Understatement.” Erin nudges him. “What? My boy here is loaded.”

“So why work with my brother?” Serena asks. “If you are so successful.”

“He just told you, he got bored, Serena,” my mother scolds.

“What?” She asks, feigning innocence. “I’m just curious.”

“I’m not quite ready to retire and golf. I’ve traveled enough. I guess you could say I work for sport now.”

“Congrats, man. Must be nice,” Thatch says sincerely. “I sure wish I had that option.”

“Where do you work now?” Eli asks me point-blank from across the table.

“She works at a marketing firm in Nashville. She’s thriving,” Serena offers on my behalf, which only humiliates me.

“Thriving is a stretch,” I correct, draining what little alcohol is left in my drink and eyeing the bottle, which is too far away.

“So what if you didn’t get the promotion. Doesn’t mean you don’t run that place,” Serena pipes. It takes all my human

strength not to reach over the table and strangle her.

“You didn’t get the promotion?” Mom exclaims, fanning the flames in my face. “Oh honey, I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“No big deal,” I lie. “I mean, it sucks, but I’m over it.”

“You’re in advertising?” Eli asks as if the rest of the conversation doesn’t matter.

“Yes, why does that surprise you?”

“You majored in music comp,” he says, eyeing everyone at the table before turning to me. “It’s just...surprising.”

“It helped her,” Serena retorts. “She composes some of the jingles to go with her campaigns *in-house*. Saves them a fortune, not that they appreciate it. The jerks.”

I kick back in my chair, wishing my drink would magically refill itself.

Finally lifting my eyes to his, I see nothing but the same pity that’s been doled out the last few days from everyone I’m close to. I hate the sight of it. He used to listen to me talk about my aspirations to be a songwriter and producer, and none of those dreams included a desk, mostly a sound board. But after I graduated, I accepted a desk job that led me in a different direction.

“So, you never got into producing?”

“No,” I say as if the conversation is boring me. “I took a different route.”

“You took a different *road* altogether,” Eli counters as all heads turn our way.

“I double majored for a reason. Advertising was always one of my game plans.”

He forks a bite of lasagna, refusing to back down. “It seemed to matter to you,” he insists. “*A lot.*”

I give him a tight smile as all eyes and ears focus on us while we volley back and forth.

“I changed my mind *a lot* after college.”

“That’s evident,” he huffs.

The. Fucking. Nerve.

I have half a mind to unleash Serena, but surprising myself, I decide to take the high road.

“I only have a *few* regrets,” I bite out, “and my career path isn’t one of them.”

As my insinuation rings clear, I realize I may have taken a left back onto simple Sally Avenue.

Oops.

“He’s been a great addition to Networth,” Brenden interjects, playing referee.

“You run an investment firm,” I draw out sarcastically. “Innovation and money don’t really go hand and hand.” I rake my fork across a mammoth noodle. “Numbers are exact. That’s a little black and white.”

My remark seems to amuse Eli as his lips lift with satisfaction. He always did love it when he got me rattled. Sadly, he was the only one who could defuse his own bombs.

“He’s not managing portfolios,” my brother—offended by my comment—tosses my way. “He’s come up with—”

“Kids, it’s Christmas,” my mother warns. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“I’m just saying,” stab, stab, stab, “it’s not like it takes a genius to tally dollars and cents.”

“Like I said, he’s not in management. In fact, he’s working on a groundbreaking app while you sell *dog food* and *toilet paper*.”

“Wow,” I say dryly. “Guess you put me in my place, brother.”

“Kids,” Dad sighs.

“Congratulations,” I mutter and lift my eyes to Eli. “On all of your success.”

This is hell. Knowing he’s successful, *rich*, and no doubt has a running car. Not only that, but his gene pool is also far superior to others. The dating app I used for all of five minutes—with suggestions of profiles of men in my age range—is a testament to that. I have no doubt British women would happily engage in a street fight *for him*. He probably has weekdays to go with his

female roster. Molly Monday, Tina Tuesday, Wendy Wednesday, or some shit like that. He most definitely isn't the laughingstock of his firm.

I doubt he had no one to spend Christmas with. He probably opted out of any one of his weekday girl invitations to show just how serious they shouldn't take him. Eli is not a commitment man, nor a family man, which only makes me curious as to why he chose to spend his holiday stuck in the middle of the mountains with *my* family. Instead of asking the question on the forefront, I fork some lasagna and shove it in my mouth.

"So, you two know each other?" Dad speaks up, finally catching on while hinting for some back story.

Wonderful.

"Yes, Sir," Eli answers, "we dated in college."

"How long?" Thatch asks.

"Briefly," I reply.

"Wasn't that brief," Eli says, challenging me, "eight months."

"That's a pretty long time," my father agrees.

"A blip," I say.

"Old College flames," Dad muses, "Isn't that something." He reaches for and squeezes Mom's hand, oblivious to the growing tension. "I got lucky in high school. She told me off the day I met her, and I've been chasing her every day since." They share a smile, and I feel Eli's eyes on me again.

"Whitney spoke of you often. I know the story."

"Do you?" My mother smiles.

He wipes his mouth and again lifts his gaze to mine. "She never shied away from talking about her family."

"So, what's on the agenda tomorrow?" I ask Dad, trying to bring the questions to a halt.

"It's all in the emails. So, you two—"

Gracie has the good sense to speak up. "Gramps, Auntie Whit doesn't want to talk about it, *gah*, so stop asking questions."

“Thank you, *nine-year-old*,” I scold every adult at the table, “for being able to pick up on crystal clear social cues. Sorry,” I offer Eli in a bullshit apology, clearly substituting my discomfort to insinuate his own.

“It’s fine,” he says, “I’m totally fine with it.”

“It was delicious, Mom. Thank you.” I toss my napkin down before standing and grabbing a few plates. “I’ve got the dishes.”

Eli stands. “I’ll help.”

Perfect.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Drying the last plate, I glance over at Whitney, who's scrubbing the empty lasagna pan.

"Tastes just like I remember it," I compliment, in an attempt to jog her memory of the first time she cooked for me.

She makes a non-committal noise, working the scrubber like it's her job.

"Want me to work on it a minute?"

"I've got it."

We've barely had a minute alone since we started cleaning due to the bustling chaos around us. It's clear there's a delicate Collin's family ecosystem in which chores are doled out by age per family. I've been assigned to Whitney moving forward because she's the only one who didn't, in Brenden's words, "spouse up."

Upon closer inspection, I notice she's gained a little healthy weight over the years—which I appreciate. She was a little on the thin side in college. Her hair is the same length as it was back then, running just past her shoulders, her lashes still ridiculously long. Aside from the outrageous amount of makeup she's wearing—which she seems to not at all give a fuck about—she looks very much the same.

“So, advertising—”

“If you recall, I was in some of the same business classes you took. Same professors.”

“I know, but I thought you’d—”

“Do something with it? I did. I use both majors.”

“Creating jingles for campaigns? You were so goo—”

“Let’s drop that, all right? Work is not a good subject for me right now.”

“Dropped.”

“Why are you here?” she whispers. “Seriously, Eli, you don’t like Christmas. Or holidays, period.”

“Your brother invited me.”

“Fine. Why did you say yes?”

“Because I wanted to come.”

“Just like that?”

I take the pan she’s been scrubbing from her hands. “Just like that.”

She’s fighting herself to ask if I knew that Brenden was her brother, but she doesn’t.

“You look the same,” I say softly. “Maybe a little more made up.”

She rolls her eyes.

“What’s with the makeup anyway?”

“Gracie did it. She wants to be a makeup artist, and I’m being supportive. She’s been practicing a lot.”

“This is *after* practice?”

Wrong thing to say.

She smacks the faucet handle up and rinses her hands, and I know my time is almost up. “I think I’m done here.”

When she turns to leave me, I grip her wrist with sud-covered hands to stop her. She stares at my hand clamped around her wrist, and her mouth parts slightly as she glances up. I feel it,

too, but I can't decipher if it's memory, familiarity, or both. I know she can see the confirmation in my own expression.

"Whitney, I didn't come with intent to ruin your Christmas. I was hoping I could—"

"So, you knew Brenden was my brother?"

I give her a slow nod.

She gently pulls her hand away and shrugs. "It was a long time ago. And no one should be alone on Christmas. I'm fine with you being here."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely." She nods several times as if to convince both of us. Eyes distant, she bites her lower lip pensively before speaking again. "I'm sorry if I've made you feel unwelcome."

She emphasizes that with another nod. "Forgive me if I haven't been hospitable, I'm...I haven't been..."

I set down the pan and turn my back to the counter, gripping the edge of it to give her my full attention.

"It's been a shitty couple of weeks."

"How so?"

"Doesn't matter, and anyway, it would be utterly ridiculous to try and hash out or even *entertain* something that happened so long ago."

Translation.

Don't go there.

I don't want your apology.

You're an idiot if you think otherwise.

A warning look is all I'm left with before she leaves me standing there, staring after her. Blowing out a loaded breath, I grab the pan and gaze out of the kitchen window, the tree-covered ridge surrounding the back of the house partially visible due to yard lights. It's then I vow to drop it for the night, knowing I'll catch hell in the next week to try and pin her down, much like I did years ago in the beginning.

“Whitney,” I call out, and she spins around, an answering smile lighting her face when she recognizes me. Her ‘I’ve seen you naked’ grin is like a beacon and has me plowing past the crowded campus hall to get to her.

“Hi. Meant to bring your sweatshirt back, but I didn’t.”

I lift a brow. “Why is that?”

She shrugs. “It’s comfortable.”

An instant image of her in my sweatshirt and black thong has my dick twitching. My attraction to her is oddly stronger than it was at the party. But that day had been a clusterfuck, and she’d been the only good thing about it. And if I’m honest, I hadn’t thought about much aside from her since last Friday night.

“Where are you headed?”

“Professor Morales.”

“I had him last year. Marketing major?”

“One of them.” She speaks through distracting, thoroughly glossed pink lips. The fact that she’s intelligent and ambitious—coupled with the plaid sweater brandishing just the right amount of cleavage—ticks more of my boxes. Boxes I’m inventing as we interact. Though I know we’re both pressed to get to our next class. I stall to keep her engaged.

“What’s your other major?”

“You’re full of questions. And I have a full schedule today, so...” she feigns ignorance of my name.

“Eli,” my smirk calls bullshit before I voice it. “But you didn’t forget.”

“You were naked. Hard to forget.”

“I was just an innocent man taking a shower before you bulldozed in and stole my innocence.”

One of her perfect dark blonde brows quirk. “An innocent who didn’t bother to cover his junk.”

“You made good use staring at said ‘junk.’ And I think I was a good sport about it, considering you’re the pervert in this scenario. And yet, you didn’t return the favor or my sweatshirt.”

“What can I say? I had my hands full. Fascinating conversation, really, but I must be going.” She turns, and I grip her wrist. Her lips part as the zing runs through us both, and our eyes meet.

My eyes relay to hers.

Yeah, I felt it too.

“Want to pick this conversation up again sometime? Maybe when you return my hoodie?”

“Not happening.”

“Which part, the convo, returning the naked favor, or my sweatshirt?”

She battles a smile and loses. “More questions. I really need to go.”

“So, you’re going to give chase?”

“I hear you’re good at keeping up.”

A small amount of satisfaction settles in my gut. She knows I ran track, so the curiosity isn’t one-sided. “You’ve been doing your homework.”

“It’s what good students do. This was fun, but I’ve really got to go,” she nudges past me, and I get a hit of her shampoo—a mix of floral and mint.

“Meet me at the coffee shop after your last class.”

She glances back at me. “What for?”

“Because you want to.”

Brenden nudges my shoulder, and I realize I’ve wasted a few gallons of water, the memory cloud dispersing as I stiffen next to him, dreading the conversation. “I was wondering why you stared at the family photo in my living room for so fucking long the day you picked it up.” Through the window, Whitney appears with a drink in hand on the deck, bundled up in reindeer pajamas, a coat, and ridiculously oversized elf slippers. She flips one of the chair covers to clear it of snow before taking a seat and propping her feet on the deck railing—the rounded tips of her slippers my focal point.

“I’m sure I know why you didn’t tell me since she clearly despises you, but seriously, man, I could have used a heads up. Especially now that I know it didn’t end well, which leads to my one and *only* question. Any plans of repeating that?”

I turn to Brenden. “None at all. Maybe a long overdue apology if she’ll hear one, which is doubtful, but I’m not here to cause any problems.”

“That’s all I need to know.”

I turn to him. “Why did she give up?”

“Give up on what, exactly?”

“All of it. When I knew her, she was full of scary ambitions. Wanted to be the female equivalent of Phil Spector, to a less murderous point.”

“She had student loans to pay off, so she took a desk job. She’s done well. She’s just not where she wants to be.”

“Yeah. I got that.”

“Look, I won’t hold your omission against you, but if you do hurt my sister again, I’m going to have to pull some big brother shit.”

“Noted.”

“I know you don’t drink much, but you’re going to have to veto that stance if you want to make it through this alive. Be a pal and help me go sniff out my mother’s Eggnog. The shit is off the chain.”

I take one last look at Whitney as she walks over to the railing and peers into the thick woods.

“Yeah, maybe one.”

CHAPTER NINE



Serena pokes her head into my attic bedroom as I read an old Shel Silverstein classic Grams used to read to me. Peyton is already fast asleep, cradled in my arms on the ancient twin mattress.

“He’s out,” she says, taking a seat on the bed next to me, weighing my expression as I close the book.

“Talk to me.”

“About what? *Eli*?” I harrumph. “Just proves that my run of shitty luck isn’t over. Rest assured, big sis, it was a shock, but I’m over it.”

“Can I just say—”

“No.”

“That he’s fucking gorgeous—”

“No.”

“And that I almost died tonight feeling all that delicious tension—”

“No.”

“And that my toes curled with the way he looked at you—”

“No.”

“And that I think he came back to see you—”

“No.”

“I mean, you guys were hot and heavy. Is it so bad, what he did—”

My look cuts her off mid-sentence.

“So, we hate him, then?”

“No. I can’t hate him because it’s bad for *me*. But I’m not thrilled he’s here.”

“I get that. But—”

“Serena,” I warn, lifting from the headboard. Peyton stirs on my chest, and I gently rock back and forth to keep him asleep. I stroke his face and hug him tighter. “He’s getting so big.”

“He is,” she sighs. “Last one.”

I push out my lip. “If that’s the case, I need to come over more.”

“You do, but Whit, I’m not dropping it.”

I groan.

“This is *me*, Whitney. You can bullshit everyone else, but not *me*. What happened across that table tonight was pure static, the good kind.”

“That’s just because you’re jonesing for some zsa zsa zu.”

“Some what?”

“Sex and the City, that’s what Carrie called it, zsa zsa zu. The friction, the spark, the butterflies.”

“You’ve really memorized that show, haven’t you?”

“Line by line, I’m afraid. It’s the bible for the single woman, hell, for *every* woman. I used to think of myself as two parts Carrie, one-part Charlotte, and a dwindling quarter of Samantha, but at this point, Miranda is threatening a takeover.”

“She’s the bitchy, red-headed cynic, right?”

“Yep.”

“Didn’t she get married and have a baby?”

“Shut up. And that’s what you’re missing with Thatch, by the way, the zsa zsa zu.”

“Will you stop about Thatch and me? We’re okay this side of the hour. Stop deflecting.”

I sigh and run my hand along Peyton’s back.

“Just tell me you didn’t feel it tonight at the table.”

“It’s just nostalgia. And you should know more than anyone at this point nostalgia is a trap.”

She scrunches her nose. “Gotta say, I don’t like Miranda on you.”

“You were judging my uninhibited Samantha earlier, so I’m afraid Miranda’s here to stay. Anyway, I’ve seen enough by now to have figured out the cycle.”

“Which episode is this?”

“This theory is all mine.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“It’s a cycle embedded in our DNA, our psyche, no matter how independent we claim to be. It happens for different women at different times, but almost always when we’re younger, less stressed, more free-spirited, sexual, and can easily mistake sexual chemistry with forever.” I run my hand across Peyton’s wayward hair.

“At the beginning of the cycle, a girl searches for the perfect mate. But the kicker is because it’s her time, she might not find the perfect *man*. Maybe she’ll just find a man willing to settle down and help her create the DNA-induced image in her head. And then one day, five, ten, fifteen years down the road, she wakes up and realizes that she married the wrong man. And the man wakes up next to her, realizing the woman he married is completely different from the one he proposed to. And that right there is the reason for the ever-present adolescent man because they want a 2.0 version of the woman they proposed to, the sexually creative, vivacious, zest for life fuck buddy they thought they were investing in. And so it goes, the woman sets off to find herself, while the husband—ex or not—begins dipping lower and lower into the pool until they’re practically dating an infant so that they can have *that girl* back. But the jokes on them because

eventually, the 2.0 version is going to hit the same part of the cycle, too. It's a hamster wheel."

Serena goes pale. "You seriously believe this?"

"I've seen enough examples at this point to know it's not far-fetched."

"What about Mom and Dad?"

"The exception, not the rule, and we only know the version they present us with. Look at your issue with Thatch now and tell me I'm barking up the wrong tree."

"You've been alone way too long in that condo."

"I'm just being honest."

"Your theory generalizes behavior of *two sexes* during the most taxing endeavor known to man. Marriage is not easy, not at all. And maybe I don't have the pink peonies in clear glass jars in every perfectly decorated and organized room—a lifestyle that I longed for and expected to have—but newsflash, babe. Martha Stewart, the woman who taught us good living, went to *federal prison* and made her epic come back doing a talk show with fucking Snoop Dogg. She's also posting selfies in a bathing suit on Instagram purely for attention *post-menopause*, which only proves that she's just as fucked up as the rest of us and needs validity that she isn't finding in real life. You're right. Most of us, at some point, want this unattainable dream, but it doesn't exist." She shakes her head. "Thatch and I might have issues. He's not perfect, neither am I, but Whitney," her voice drops, her tone urgent, "I married him *believing* he is my match, and I still believe it, most days. I'm so grateful for him, really, but don't get me wrong, I *want* those butterflies back, and honestly, I haven't felt them in a very long time...and I'm fucking scared, so stop bullying me about it. Because," her eyes water, and I instantly feel guilty, "what if I never feel them with him again?"

"I'm sorry." I grab her hand and squeeze. "You'll feel them again. It's Thatch."

"I don't know," she sniffs. "This morning, I was soaking in a bubble bath—my first bubble bath in *ages*—and Thatch came in and took a two-minute asparagus piss with the obligatory pop fart. And when I unleashed hell at him, he slowly pulled back the shower curtain, folded his arms, and said '*it was a good pee.*'"

I burst out laughing, rattling the baby, and shake my head. “I love that man.”

“It’s not funny.”

“It’s hilarious, and that’s you and Thatch. That’s your dynamic, and it’s awesome. Honestly, you two give me hope.” I sigh. “Just don’t listen to me right now. I’m in a fucked-up headspace.”

“I know, and I’m trying to help. So be honest and tell me how you really feel about Eli.”

Swallowing, I stare back at Serena, knowing I won’t get away with anything but the truth. Temporarily, I allow the wall down that I slammed up after seeing his icy blue eyes on the porch hours ago.

“Seeing him was like being stung by a thousand bees...like a shot of something jarring, but you don’t know if it’s good or bad until you register the sting.” I pull at a loose thread on Peyton’s pajamas. “You know the guy that’s good at everything, excels at *everything*, is too brilliant to ever study, too athletic to be a real human. The guy that with one look can activate every cell in your body, the guy that completely occupies your head and heart to the point you can’t believe he’s yours?”

“Yes, that’s how I felt with Thatch in the beginning.”

“Exactly. With Eli, I started to dream in all kinds of ways, wet dreams, future dreams, and before we broke up...wedding dreams.”

“I remember. You called me the night of your first date.”

I nod. “In the beginning, I played hard to get because I thought it was the only way with a guy like Eli. Pathetically, I thought *I* was the lucky one, and he was out of my league. Which, let’s face it, at the moment is truer now than it ever was then—by current life standards. But in the grand scheme, that meant fuck all because we *didn’t* match where it mattered. Every time we would start to get really close, he’d pull back, distance himself just enough to put me, us, in our respective place. He was so hot and cold. Sometimes I was sure I was the only woman that existed for him. Other times he made me wonder if he was even attracted to me. There’s a reason he’s single now, and I’m pretty sure it’s the same reason we split. Eli wasn’t the guy you were

supposed to plan a future with. He was the guy to break your heart and break it in well. I didn't realize it until it was too late." I glance over at her, "if I ever had a chance of having a *one*, he was the closest it came for me. I really, *really* loved him. Like saw stars when he entered a room loved him."

"I know."

"And you know I never once told him. I knew even when I felt it, saying it would be a mistake. That was the first red flag of many that I ignored, foolishly thinking that love conquers all. In the end, I don't know what hurt me more, that we broke up, or that I never got the chance to be with him with my heart wide open."

She nods. "I hated that you had to go back to school after that summer. I barely pulled you back together for senior year."

"But I *did* get over it, over him. Seeing him at this point in my life is not fun, mostly because of the place I'm in. A year ago, or even six months ago, I would've taken this so much better. I definitely would've behaved better. My confidence is fucking shot at the moment, so I'm..." I blow out a harsh breath. "So much time has passed, and because I'm a grown-up, I will be mature about this."

"Whitney, he's not out of your league."

"No, he's not. Not in the way that matters to *me*. He's just got more money and has a better workout regimen. You know it stung at dinner, and after when he reminded me I didn't exactly do what I set out to career-wise. He seems to have his shit together. Hell, it's his second time around the career track. That part really sucks."

"So, we hate him?"

"No. We feel sorry for him. We have empathy for him because even though he hit his career goals, he's obviously still the same singularly focused commitment-phobe he was years ago, which stopped being alluring to me in my early thirties. I don't see men like Eli as a challenge anymore. I see men like him as a waste of time because mine is too precious to be investing in those who don't want it."

She widens her eyes, calling me out.

“Kyle was a blip. A *hung* blip. Do you know how many houses this Goldie Locks had to break into to find the right size? It’s a shit show, a toss of the dice. Seriously, and I didn’t want to run up more mileage without a good stick to drive.”

“Your analogies are a lot like a man’s.”

“Probably because I’m starting to think a little like one.”

“Do you think Eli’s the reason you never marr—”

“Don’t you dare. No dick has ever or will ever have that much power over me.” Even as I say it, I feel a slight gnaw in my gut. “All hearts break differently, and God, it hurt, but I haven’t not given other men a chance because of him.”

No gnaw. That’s the truth. She continues to stare at me and hesitates.

“What?”

“Do you feel like me bitching about Thatch has affected the way you view marriage?”

The slight shake in her voice has me squeezing her hand. “No, babe, you and Thatch are *fantastic* examples of marriage done right. Even when you ugly fight. I promise you, even if you can’t see it, it’s just a rough patch.”

She brings watery eyes to mine.

“I want the zsa zsa zu back.”

“Don’t we all. Maybe a dose of it would be good for me too,” I admit. “Maybe it’ll stave off Miranda a bit longer. But Eli is not the solution.”

“We’re a perfect example of grass is greener syndrome, aren’t we? Polar opposite lifestyles and neither of us seems to be content.”

“I think that’s just life, right?”

She nods while taking Peyton from my arms and stands. “You know...he didn’t tell Brenden you two dated, so there’s more to why he’s here. When I confronted him earlier, I asked him if he knew you would be here, and he refused to answer me. There’s more to this than you think.”

“Pack it up, Sherlock.” The threat in my tone is enough to shut her up for the moment. “Get it out of your head. There will be no reconciliation. Christmas is business as usual. No projecting your zsa zsa zu hopes on *me*.”

“Everything isn’t always what it seems. And let’s face it, he’s spending Christmas with *our* family.” Her chest pumps. “Ha! He’ll be regretting that shit decision with or without our help.”

I smile. “That’s so true. *Dumbass*. He has no idea what he’s in for. Just remember, we broke up for a reason—a very good reason—I saw stars, and he stole them from me and ran. So no, this is not a second chance with him. This is not some awesome twist of fate.”

“I’m here for you if you need me.”

“I’m fine. This is about the kids. Period. He’s not ruining my time with them or our Christmas.” Serena nods, retreating with our baby toward the door, and I speak up, eyeing the table-top-sized Christmas tree Mom put in the corner just for me, lights, ornaments, and all. “Mom is so awesome, isn’t she? She made everything perfect.”

Serena nods. “She did.”

“You know,” she starts, “I was your age when I had Peyton —”

“Get out, *immediately*, get out of my bedroom.”

“Fine,” her shoulders slump.

“Serena. You’re overly concerned and have already driven me to drink one too many tonight, okay? I love you, and I know you love me, but there’s a slim to zero chance I’ll ever be a mother or even marry at this point. I think I accepted it long before now, and you need to as well.”

“K,” she says, stroking Peyton’s back and stopping at the door. “Light on or off?”

“Off, please.”

She clicks it off and turns back to me, her profile lit by the soft glow of the tree lights. “You know, you might think you believe what you said about the cycle or whatever, but I also

know if the right man came along, you'd still go through with it. All of it, because that's your heart, Whitney. You're a believer."

When I don't reply, she sighs in defeat. "Love you. Night."



Cracking my neck due to the shit condition of the twin mattress, I pad lightly down the stairs, parched due to the amount of heat I've endured in the Raggedy Ann sweatshop.

At the threshold of the kitchen, a groan stops me. I peek around to see Eli, shirtless, in pajama bottoms scratching his perfect ass while opening the fridge. At thirty-nine, he's still rocking one hell of a body, which is lethal to my senses. Muscular biceps, the perfect smattering of chest hair, cut pecs and between them...I squint in the dim light focusing on the tattoo strategically placed where his heart lay just beneath. I make out an EKG showing two distinct heartbeats. That's new, or maybe it's not, but it's new to *me*. Just below are cut abs, a taught, toned stomach, and a hint of the dark happy trail that leads to—what I remember to be—the perfect cock. Eli set the standard, long, thick and veiny, with an oversized, mouthwatering tip. Time hasn't been kind enough to rob me of that image. With one long, bittering drink of him, I decide *we do* hate him.

Opting to lap up the water from the bathroom faucet rather than face him, I jump when I hear him speak up.

"Hey, you. What are you doing in here spying on me?"

Face flaming, I open my mouth to reply when I hear the squeak of a familiar voice.

"Lie!"

Eli clicks on the low light beneath the hood of the stove.

"That's Eli, little ginger. Where did you come from? I'm pretty sure I helped your dad set up a reinforced cage mere hours ago. How did you manage to get out of it and *past* the stair gate? You a little Houdini or something?"

Unable to resist, I take a step into the kitchen marginally covered in shadow to see them in a stare-off. Peyton's fire engine

hair sticks up on all sides, his toy truck pajamas fitting his pudgy body like a second skin. Eli scoops him up, and they collectively examine the fridge, bathed by the light of it.

“Mil,” Peyton pumps a grabby hand.

“Milk? Got you covered.” Eli takes the milk out and pulls Peyton’s sippy cup off the dry rack where we washed it together hours before. The sight of my nephew curled in his bicep is enough to ruin me.

“Lie,” Peyton shakes his head. “*Ber mil.*”

“I don’t know what you mean, little man.”

Peyton refuses the cup when Eli offers it and begins to squirm in his arms to be let down. “Lie...Lie...Ber mil!”

“Shhhh, little buddy, you’re going to wake up the house.”

Insistent, Peyton pushes on his chest and wiggles until Eli relents and sets him down. Peyton waddles back to the fridge. “Lie, comere, mere,” he demands.

Eli chuckles and walks over, and the baby opens and closes his hand at the fridge.

“Okay.” When he opens the door, Peyton points to the strawberry syrup amongst the condiments. “Ber Mil.”

“Ah, *strawberry* milk. Smart little guy. Aren’t you?” Eli says, grabbing the syrup.

“Sooooo smar.” Peyton agrees, and I have to muffle my laugh. Eli walks them back over to the counter, and Peyton lifts his hands with another order. “Up...up.”

“A man that knows what he wants. My kind of guy. Then again, your Aunt was a bit bossy too. Must run in the family. Ignoring the tug in my chest at his recollection of me, I remain planted where I stand.

Eli lifts Peyton onto the counter. “Spoo.”

“On it.” Eli, AKA my nephew’s new bitch, searches a few drawers and finds a spoon before presenting it to Peyton for inspection. “You got a size preference on the spoon, or will this do?”

“Squee. Squee.” He instructs Eli as if *he’s* the toddler.

“Why do I have a feeling that this isn’t your first rodeo?” Eli flips the cap ceremoniously with his thumb, making a production of it. “So, if I’m getting this right, you want two squeezes?”

“Mep.”

Chuckling, Eli mixes the drink and hands it to Peyton.

“Tank ku.”

“Welcome.”

Milk in hand, he scoops the baby up from the counter just as Peyton upturns his cup. After returning the milk to the fridge, Eli walks him over to my grandfather’s old leather rocker in the living room. Dawn breaks, and purple light filters through the massive windows as Eli gently rocks Peyton, who’s nestled comfortably in his lap.

“Col.”

“Cold?”

“Mep,” the baby sighs out between deep breaths after stealing sips of milk. Eli grabs a throw within reach from the lip of the couch and bundles them in the blanket. Clearly, this is not the same Eli who, when we dated, became suddenly allergic when things got too intimate. Nor the Eli who never took our relationship more seriously than the day-to-day. The Eli who gave me whiplash with his hot and cold, slowly poisoning my whimsical, free bleeding heart after eight months of effort to hand it to him. The Eli who shunned me completely just after. The same Eli, who, despite his best efforts, we became so entangled as a couple it was hard to tell us apart.

Entranced, I watch as Eli runs a palm over Peyton’s hair, a nurturing look in his eyes. “Not sure your parents will be happy with me feeding you sugary milk at 6 a.m., so let’s keep this between us.”

The baby doesn’t respond but sucks on his cup as Eli gently pushes off on his bare foot lulling him back to sleep.

I gaze on at the two of them, my heart aching in a way I didn’t realize was possible. And it’s then I see clearly the why of what hurts me the most when it comes to Eli. It wasn’t just the way we ended. It’s because it’s *Eli*. The same Eli who used to look at me with raw tenderness yet never spoke a word of how he

felt. The Eli who used to torture me with his kiss until I begged him to touch me. My God, the way he used to kiss me as if he would never get the chance to again.

The Eli who made me feel like I was *the* most important, most cherished woman on earth with his *actions*.

Unwanted visions of us haze in, of when we were together and of when we were happy. Even if he was cruel in dismissing me—us—I know I wasn't alone in feeling it. We were good together. Better than good. I never imagined we would end the way we did. Despite his aversion to talking anything future or long-term, I never thought he'd let go of me so easily, so abruptly the way he did. There is a reason I mourned our breakup for so long. But facts are facts. He *did* let go of me abruptly and without a single ounce of fight. I let him get away with it, shattering my heart without ample explanation because deep down, maybe I knew he was that guy, no matter how much it surprised me...I was right. Chest burning with ancient hurt, I turn and creep back up the stairs, climb into bed, and stare up at the ceiling as morning sunlight fills the room.

CHAPTER TEN



I barely slept. The mattress was comfortable enough, but I couldn't stop thinking about Whitney, who was sleeping just two floors up. I denied my own sleep with thoughts of her like some needy fucking teenage boy, which has me second-guessing my decision to come here.

I sleep like a rock at home.

Being amongst her family last night, I was oddly comfortable, even with the inquisition. It was Whitney who squirmed the whole time, refusing to acknowledge we ever dated, existed. I'd managed a little snooze with Peyton before Thatch took him from me and told me I could go back to bed. Even then, I stared out the window at the early morning sky, appreciating the peace of the area. Briefly, I entertained the thought of buying a place out here of my own, which is odd because I'm a short-term lease man. Already this trip, seeing her after over a decade and a half, is starting to fuck with me. I came here for a reason, aside from selfish curiosity, and I'm determined to see it through.

Denied after several attempts to help Ruby with breakfast, I sit at the table, scrolling through the emails on my phone. It's the rumble on the stairs that grabs my attention. I look up to see Gracie flying towards the table, her parents behind her looking a little sleep-deprived. My new partner in crime in the arms of the

woman behind them, taking feeble steps toward the table, eyes cast down. The sight of Whitney in nothing but sweats, without a trace of clown makeup, blonde hair in a loose, fast braid activates my tunnel vision.

She's still so fucking beautiful.

I love the added weight on her, the curve in her frame, which I can make out even though she's using her nephew as a shield. As clearly as I see her, the gnawing in my gut says she doesn't, at all, want me to. Where did my confident, sexy, mouthy bee go? Has so much happened to her in the time that's passed that she lost a healthy amount of it?

She's in her element here, in this cabin, or she should be. Is my presence making her so uncomfortable that she doesn't feel at ease around her own family? The thought grates on me as she avoids my gaze.

When we dated, her family was a subject that came up often. Her antic's always starting with "My sister this," or "my brother" that.

Then, I was a newly orphaned twenty-one-year-old, the scar from my parent's loss barely turning from crimson red to a paler shade of pink when I met her. And though I told her I was okay with her endless stories, all things Collins family, at times, the green-eyed monster would come out.

Because I was jealous.

Insanely jealous of her family dynamic. So much so I was an asshole to her for it at times, and she never knew why.

Hindsight is a bitch slapping the hell out of me right now as I take her demeanor in. This is the life she wanted, a family life, with *me*, though she never put a voice to it. But Whitney didn't hint around it either. She bulldozed it into my brain by constantly reiterating her unwavering affection for her family.

All I know is the girl she was then, and I have only caught traces of her. This woman before me seems...jaded and a little defeated, a stark contrast to the girl who ran me over in college. She said she'd had a rough couple of weeks, and that I understand because... *life*. Still, I would love a glimpse of the cocky girl I fell for. If only she would give me a chance to get within a foot of her.

“Lie!” Peyton exclaims when he spots me, fighting his aunt’s hold and reaching for me. This does not go over well with the aunt.

“Good Morning,” I say to all of them as they take seats at the table.

“Brenden, Erin, get the lead out!” Ruby calls upstairs.

A chime sounds throughout the house, and a dinner bell rings over the Alexas—which I learned through Brenden’s bitching—that Allen has strategically placed in every room of the cabin.

Alexa: Announcement: “SOOOOOUUUUIIIIEEE!! Come get your bacon, kids. Breakfast is served.”

“Oh my God,” Brenden protests as he reaches the landing of the stairs with Wyatt in his arms. “Who in the hell taught Dad how to use Alexa?”

Whitney points to Thatch, who winces. “My bad.”

We all hear Allen instructing Alexa from wherever he is in the house. Another announcement sounds.

Alexa: Announcement: “Eat up and be ready in thirty. We’re heading out.”

Brenden projects his voice as they enter the dining room. “We can hear you yelling into the fancy tech contraption, Dad, so cut it out. Mom, please tell me there’s coffee.”

“Get it yourself, brat. I’m cooking.”

“I’ve got you, babe,” Erin says to Brenden before turning to me with a soft, “Morning, Eli.”

“Morning,” I reply. Erin and Brenden’s personalities are a complete contrast to the other, the very definition of yin and yang. Where Brenden is opinionated and intense, Erin is laid back and soft-spoken, and yet they work, or they seem to.

Ruby enters from the kitchen and sets down a platter of bacon and eggs, her expression warming as she scans her children and grandchildren as they set up highchairs and huddle around the table. “Toast is coming.”

Only Whitney acknowledges her as the rest of the table remains distracted.

“Looks good, Mom. Thank you. I would’ve helped.”

“Eli offered half a dozen times already. Don’t fret. It’s a simple breakfast,” she assures with a hand on Whitney’s shoulder before heading back into the kitchen.

“I’ve got the dishes,” Whitney and I call after her at the same time.

Whitney’s eyes meet mine briefly, and I give her a smile that she does not return. “Morning.”

“Morning,” she mutters as she takes the seat across from me.

Alexa sounds off again, and shortly after, Burl Ives’ “Holly Jolly Christmas” starts to play throughout the house.

“Jesus,” Brenden says, shaking his head before shooting me a wary look, “Did I warn you my family was insane?”

“Yeah, you did,” I say with a chuckle.

“Did you sleep well?” Erin asks as Whitney again glances my way. I can’t quite decipher the look before her eyes stray.

“Perfect. Thanks.”

Brenden secures Wyatt in his chair and takes the seat next to me. “In the den, you’re in safe range from Dad’s snoring.”

“Didn’t hear a thing. It’s peaceful here.”

Brenden gawks at me like I’m growing an extra head as I pile some eggs on my plate. “Give it time, man.”

Whitney pushes a bowl of grapes out of Peyton’s reach before locking him into his highchair.

“No grapes, Pey, Pey.”

“Why not?” I ask, making simple conversation in an attempt to engage.

“Because he could choke.” She averts her attention to Peyton putting down a small plastic bowl on his highchair. “Bananas.” She breaks the fruit into large chunks before fastening a bib around his neck.

“You’re a wild one, aren’t you?” I ask with a grin.

“Mep,” he replies before shoving some banana in his mouth.

Brenden chuckles. “When did that start?”

Thatch speaks up, sporting a fond grin while eyeing his son. “A week or two ago. And I have no idea where he got it.”

Serena comes in with full coffee mugs setting one down for Thatch.

“Thanks, babe,” Thatch says absently. Serena’s expression falls when Brenden thanks Erin for delivering his coffee by way of a smack on the butt and a heated look, which is anything but subtle.

“Ewww, Uncle Brenden,” Gracie pipes in.

“Hush your face,” Brenden scolds, reaching over to run his hand down her face, before pulling her nose up with his pointer, giving her pig nose. “Killjoy.”

“What’s a k-killjoy?” Gracie asks with a giggle, batting her uncle’s hand away.

“Google it,” Thatch replies.

“I can’t Google *anything*, Daddy, because you *took my phone.*”

“Technically, your mother did.”

“So, you’ll give my phone back to me, Daddy?”

Sugary-sweet and innocent. A born manipulator, a natural.

Fire shoots from Serena’s eyes, and Thatch winces.

Allen appears, taking his seat at the head of the table where he screams his greeting. “Morning, family, *Eli.*”

I try my best to mask my flinch. “Morning, Sir.”

“Lord, the man is testing me. Give me strength,” Ruby mutters as golden toast pops up in front of her where she stands at the counter.

“So, where are we going?” I ask Serena to test the waters, and she ignores me. Thatch rolls his eyes and speaks up.

“Town square. Today is mystery Rudolph. All the adults get assigned someone to shop for because we used to buy for the kids only. It’s a deal we made when all of us started multiplying.”

“So I don’t get left out,” Whitney mutters dryly.

“That’s not true,” Ruby cuts in, buttering the toast.

“It’s *pity* Rudolph,” Whitney declares defiantly. “And I don’t need it. Just make them happy.” She nods towards her nieces and nephews.

“It’s not pity Rudolph,” Ruby refutes. “You shouldn’t be left out because you don’t have a husband or kids.”

“So you and I are in this together,” I say. Whitney’s grip on her fork tightens. She no longer seems to be a morning person. And by the look she’s giving me, I expect fire to singe off my face and jugular any second. It becomes even scarier when she flashes me her entire upper and lower deck of teeth. “It appears we are.”

Serena’s chest bounces and Thatch elbows her in the boob. She levels him with one look. “Do you want to die today?”

“Watching Die Hard today?” Allen belts from next to me, making me jump in my seat. “They have deemed it as a Christmas movie, you know. Alexa! Is Die Hard a Christmas Movie?!”

Alexa: “It certainly is. Some would argue it is the best.”

“That’s my girl,” he screams with a nod.

“Allen!” Ruby belts, matching his deafening tone. “Put your ears in, honey. They’re on the dresser!” Allen doesn’t so much as glance her way.

“Actually, Bruce Willis debunked that during his Comedy Central roast,” Brenden interjects.

“Mystery Rudolph is so fun, Eli,” Gracie pipes. “We all choose somebody to shop for, but the present has to show how well you know the person you pick, so you have to make it special.” Gracie leans toward me, her voice dropping. “Grandma gives weird presents.”

“I heard that, Gracie. For the record, your grandfather is the only one in *denial* about losing his hearing.”

Gracie’s eyes widen. “Oops, sorry, Grammy.”

“Forgiven, and my presents aren’t weird. It just takes you all a while to figure them out. Which only goes to show I know *you all better* than you know yourselves.”

Brenden chimes in. “She got me a coin bank for two consecutive years before I started college. I thought it was a hint to get a job to help pay for tuition.”

“But I knew you would be our finance guru,” Ruby declares proudly. “He had a knack for numbers and was really good with his money. Being a lawyer would have bored him to death.”

“True,” Brenden agrees.

“We all know Serena’s favorite,” Ruby adds.

“A tape measurer,” Serena says affectionately, grabbing Thatch’s hand.

Thatch squeezes Serena’s hand before his eyes flick to mine. “I answered a want ad Allen placed for help to build a deck at their home in Nashville. I had no idea what I was doing. I just turned twenty, and I was broke. It took us *months* to finish it, and only because he made painstaking effort to show me the ins and outs.”

“Then I invited him over for a celebratory dinner when Serena came home for Christmas break during her first year of college,” Ruby interjects. “That was all she wrote.”

“That night, I snuck over after they went to bed,” Thatch says with a chuckle.

“And almost every night after,” Ruby scolds lightly. Thatch’s jaw goes slack. “Oh *please*, we knew you two met in Allen’s tool shed every night for months.”

“It was our love shack,” Serena admits.

“Barf,” Gracie says with a mouthful.

“That’s only because I was too broke to take you out on real dates,” Thatch confesses, slight shame in his tone.

“I didn’t care. We’ve been together ever since,” Serena finishes the story as she stares fondly at Thatch, looking for some acknowledgment just as he releases her hand. Her expression dims significantly before she glances around the table. Her misty eyes land on mine and narrow in a new threat, and I quickly dart my gaze away.

“The brother I always wanted,” Whitney declares fondly as Brenden shoots her a death glare.

“What was your favorite Ruby present?” I ask Whitney.

“Her microphone,” Ruby answers with a sigh. “Which she didn’t use nearly enough.”

“I did use it,” Whitney defends, “when the occasion called for it.”

I hate the spotlight. I only sing for the people I love.

It was one of her first personal admissions to me when we started to get close. I’d catch her singing in the shower or while she was writing something, and she always shied away or distracted me, mostly with other impressive ways of using her mouth.

“It doesn’t have to be sentimental,” Gracie informs me.

“Sentimental,” Thatch corrects.

“It can be a funny present, too,” she continues through a mouth full of eggs, pulling my attention away from the mouth prompting my perverse thoughts. “Uncle Brenden put poop as Grandpa’s present last year.” Gracie turns to Allen. “Remember that, Gramps? When Uncle Brenden put poop as your present?!”

“Let’s not repeat that, son,” Allen booms from his chair. “Fake turds, okay, actual deer shit,” he cuts a hand through the air, “*not okay!*”

“Language,” Ruby snaps from the kitchen, making baseball signals to Allen to get his hearing aids. Allen purposefully ignores her, and she mutters her own curse, which has my lips lifting.

“It was lovingly bundled in saran wrap—” Brenden defends as Allen talks over him.

“I would have preferred a new pair of slippers! Note to whomever my Rudolph is this year. I would like slippers, not animal feces!”

“It was attached to a gift card,” Brenden counters. “And it was reindeer crap, Dad. Magical!” Brenden shouts, giving him jazz fingers.

Allen nods and smiles in reply, no doubt not hearing a word Brenden said.

“We have to have Frosty’s hat!” Gracie exclaims. “Grammy! Where is Frosty’s hat?!”

“I’m right here, Gracie, and I think we have enough yelling going on.” Ruby sets down a buttered platter of toast and again attempts to signal to Allen to get his ears before returning to the kitchen.

Thankful for the coffee jolt, I struggle to keep up with the three conversations that start simultaneously as Peyton chants my name while smashing bananas into his highchair. Wyatt sits adjacent to him, looking oddly dignified in a Christmas sweater and what looks to be baby designer jeans and killer boots I wouldn’t mind owning a pair of, his hair perfectly combed back. He’s more stylish as an eight-month-old than I am at thirty-nine. I haven’t heard a peep out of either of Brenden’s children since they got to the table. Conner remains at her mother’s side, offering all of us shy smiles, and when her eyes land on me, I give her a wink which only has her burrowing further into Erin’s hip. It’s always easy hanging with Brenden at his house because his kids are both soundless and immaculate. Erin passed her soft-spoken nature down to both children, a stark contrast to Brenden’s no-shits-given repartee.

Serena seems to be weighing the difference in their behavior as well, her eyes darting to the circus on her side of the gene pool in comparison to the violin-type atmosphere on Brenden’s end. Suspicious and no doubt envious, she narrows her eyes on both Erin and Brenden before interrogating her brother. “What did you do to your children to make them behave this way?”

Brenden shrugs, and Erin grins. “We just got lucky.”

“Oh yeah?” Ruby chimes in with a grin. “Have *another* one. Have *one* more. I dare you.”

“What?” Whitney asks, instantly offended as third born. “I wasn’t *that* bad.”

“You were a nightmare,” Allen booms as I smirk at her from across the table. She sinks in her seat and folds her arms. “Here we go.”

“Vaseline,” Ruby says, “she was obsessed with it. Actually, *anything* in a tube. All of it had to be out and everywhere.”

“Let’s move on,” Whitney mutters into her coffee.

“Played with her own shit too!” Allen screams at my side, “smashed her diapers against the wall.”

“Grandpa!” Gracie chides. “Go get your ears! You’re yelling really loud!”

“Daddy,” Whitney scolds, a mild blush pinkening her cheeks.

“That was just her way of telling us she was an artist,” Ruby interjects, taking her seat and placing her napkin neatly on her lap, “she just needed better tools.”

“Can we not paint that picture at breakfast,” Brenden says, shoveling some jar oatmeal into his son’s mouth. “Some of us haven’t eaten yet.”

“You shut up,” Ruby scolds, “you aimed for your mouth when you peed. You were fascinated with your winky.”

Gracie laughs so hard she chokes on her eggs, and Thatch gives her a hard pat to dislodge them without so much as glancing her way. Thoroughly entertained, I kick back in my seat as the stories start coming in from all sides. Whitney shakes her head, her first genuine smile of the morning breaking through as she eyes everyone at the table with sincere adoration. I know that look. I was a recipient of that look at one time. She beams with endearment as she surveys the table before flitting a glance my way.

“I can report he’s still obsessed with his winky,” Erin chimes in, and the table explodes with laughter. She turns to me and mouths, “I love this family.”

“I’m beginning to see why,” I shoot back.

Erin shrugs. “Only reason I married *him*.” Brenden feigns offense as Wyatt denies another bite.

“And Serena,” Ruby begins after a sip out of her coffee mug, “well—”

“Mom, it’ll do you good to remind you that I’ll be the one to decide what home to put you and Dad into. Test me, woman,” Serena says icily, and Ruby and Allen share a grin. I can’t help my deep chuckle, and Peyton joins me from across the table, his burst of laughter hysterical compared to mine, which only makes me laugh harder. The whole table turns to stare at us as we duel back and forth, Whitney’s eyes going wide the longer it lasts.

“Liiiiieee,” Peyton sighs with a fondness that has my chest aching, like we have some inside joke and the whole table does a collective, “ahhhh,” as Whitney’s nostrils flare with jealousy.

“These two have started a bromance,” Thatch speaks up, grinning from ear to ear.

“Lie,” Peyton repeats, opening his fists to me and offering a smashed piece of banana as Whitney snakes her hand around his middle and leans in with a fresh bribe. “Want to take a bubble bath?”

This gains his immediate loyalty. “Mep.”

Whitney smirks. *My nephew.*

Peyton manages a grip on a few of his scrambled eggs before smashing them into his mouth as Whitney lifts a brow to me in challenge. “Eat your eggs, baby,” Whitney coos, “then it’s tubby time. Dishes are all yours, *Lie.*”

I can’t help my grin. “No problem.”

There’s that fire, the girl I remember. Mouthy, opinionated, competitive, territorial, beautiful. I’d never met a girl so confident, so comfortable in her skin. Staring at her now, I may not know exactly who she is at this point, but those traits are timeless. When our gaze again catches, I sink back into the past.

LL Cool J’s “Head Sprung” blares from mammoth speakers as I haul one side of the keg toward the house. Chris glances over at me, weighing my expression. “It’s just a party, man. Seriously, you’re acting like I asked you to get your balls waxed.”

“I told you. I’m over this shit.” I have an aversion to loud noise, parties, and crowds due to an insanely sheltered childhood. When I got to college, I dove into the campus party scene with both feet to try and rid myself of it and partook too much in an attempt to feel comfortable. In the end, I decided pushing myself did more harm than good. I’m not a happy drunk, I’m a mean one, and it became evident the harder I tried. I glance around the freezing yard filled to the brim with UNC alumni and grimace. Weed clouds waft from every direction as we haul the keg toward the back door and out into the yard. There’s a pileup of people crowding a keg in use, a girl dangling from the ankles by way of two UNC ballers. She’s chugging like a pro as they chant around her in an impressive twenty count before tapping

out. It's the honey blonde hair cascading over the top of the keg along with the oversized sweatshirt tucked into her jeans that has me scrutinizing her more closely. My lips lift instantly.

Whitney.

"You know her?" Chris asks, following my line of sight.

"Yeah," I say as she's placed on the ground, upright. She then untucks my hoodie before swiping her foam-covered mouth with the sleeve of it—the savage.

Next to her, I recognize the puking devil as she talks to her animatedly. One of the ballers interrupts, leaning down and whispering into Whitney's ear. Her answering smile has my own smile diminishing.

"You going to help me tap this or what?" Chris asks, stealing my attention away from her.

"It's not that difficult," I say as the baller again leans down to whisper in her ear, and the foreign feeling at the sight of it has my blood pumping.

Chris harrumphs as he watches me eye the exchange. "Good to see you might actually make use of your dick this semester. Also, it amazes me that we finally have the perfect spot to throw parties, and all of a sudden, the house is off-limits."

"The microwaved plate of dog shit on Halloween ended any chance of another party. And you pay little to no rent, so stop your bitching," I quip.

"Even so, what guy doesn't like parties?"

I thumb my chest, my eyes drifting back to Whitney. "This guy."

"Whatever, man, you used to be a lot more fun."

I can't deny, I probably was, but I gave myself a lot more leash back then. I'm over sleep deprivation, day-long hangovers, and worrying about my temperament or what a blackout might cost me.

"Eight months left to graduation, and you're already tapping out." He unleashes the keg and pours out two glasses of foam as a crowd starts to form around us.

“Over this conversation, too,” I drawl in irritation, my eyes plastered to the elusive blonde who stood me up for coffee. At first, I couldn’t wrap my head around it. The chemistry was definitely there. I just assumed there was a good excuse for her not showing, and I would catch her again in the hallway to get an explanation. The more I watch her, the more I start to think it was intentional.

I feel like an idiot believing otherwise. Without thinking it through, I make my way toward her, catching some of her conversation as I approach.

“Stop being such a wuss, and just do it once because I’m not dragging your drunk ass home again. You need to learn to handle your alcohol, woman.”

“I have a mother, and I left her in Nashville,” devil girl replies. “And I swear to God, every time you drink, you sound like her.”

“Well, every time you drink, you sound like this, ‘Oh my glod, Whitbey.’” Chuckling at her spot-on impression, I step up to them just as Whitney notices me, and her eyes fly to mine.

“I have to admit,” I say to devil girl, “she nailed it.”

Devil girl’s eyes roll over me and widen before I turn to Whitney, whose eyes do the same, which only further fucks with me as she speaks up. “Hi.”

“Hi. You stood me up.”

“I never said I was coming,” she muses.

“Hi,” the devil interjects. “Who in the hell are you?”

“I’m the guy whose bathroom you decorated on Halloween.”

The devil has the decency to look remorseful. “You’re naked guy?”

“Eli,” I introduce myself with the lift of my chin.

“Elizabeth,” the devil replies.

Whitney sighs and rolls her eyes. “Her name is not Elizabeth. That’s her alias for bad behavior.”

“Fine, I’m Alyssa.” Her eyes again roll down me, and Whitney takes note. “Wait, you’re Eli Welch. You won division

last year in track.”

“That’s right.”

“Then you quit.”

“Yeah, wasn’t feeling it this year.”

The devil grins, and I don’t like the look of it. “I’ve heard of you.”

“Have you? Is it a good thing, or should I create an alias, too?”

Alyssa seems to mull it over. “Wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“That so?” I lean in. “And what exactly are they saying about me?”

She tosses a warning look at Whitney, who’s focused on me. Alyssa is cute, brunette, tall, glasses that work on her, full lips, but it’s the girl beside her that I zero in on.

“I don’t really think that matters at the moment,” Alyssa says, looking between us before she grabs the empty Solo cup from Whitney’s hands. “I’ll go get us more beers.”

“The keg is right behind you,” Whitney says, her focus on me.

“Yeah, gross, everyone’s been slurping off the nozzle.”

“I knew you’d chicken out,” Whitney calls after her as Alyssa shoots her the bird. Whitney grins and turns back to me.

“You wouldn’t know it by watching us, but we’ve been best friends since middle school. That girl needs tough love. She’s got to learn to take risks.” She runs her hands up and down her arms.

“Cold?”

“Yeah.”

“I’d offer you a jacket or a hoodie, but it seems you’ve already got one.”

She glances down, stretching the material out in front of her with no shame. “Like it?”

“Looks familiar.”

“You still can’t have it back.”

“I’d be more inclined to gift it to you if you hadn’t of stood me up.”

“I didn’t stand you up. I never said I was coming. You just assumed I would.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Honestly...I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“What?”

“Let me clarify. You aren’t a good idea.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

“I know your type.”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t.” A burst of music blares through the speakers, and I shudder. She notices.

“Don’t like music?”

“Not mixed with crowds.” Fuck. I sound like a freak.

“Seriously? Don’t like concerts, either?”

“Hate them.”

“Wow. This is serious. Good thing I didn’t meet you at the coffee house. We have nothing in common. What’s your damage?”

I shrug. “Just an introvert.”

“If that’s the case, what are you doing here, Eli?”

“Didn’t want to be here. I was dragged in kicking and screaming, but I’m thinking maybe you’re the reason, Whitney.”

“Full already, Eli?” Ruby asks, pulling me out of my haze as Whitney rears her head back in slight surprise as though she just had the same memory. Our gaze holds as Brenden clears his throat. It’s then I realize most of the table has gone quiet and is focused on us. And that’s us, or at least it *was* us. It’s this...thing, this draw, this chemistry, this attraction happening now between us that made her impossible to forget.

For me, Whitney Collins was the one that got away...because I pushed her away. Even so, I never forgot her, and it’s because of

this invisible thread that's bound me to her since the day we met. It appeared—much like her—out of nowhere.

“Don't let him fool you, Mom,” Whitney speaks up, her eyes dulling with accusation. “Eli believes the body is a temple, and carbs were manufactured by the devil. He only ate the lasagna last night to be polite.”

Ruby turns to me with guilt-ridden eyes. “If I had known, I would have bought turkey bacon.” I open my mouth to reply as Whitney continues to nail my balls to my chair.

“He's a clean eater who works out twice a—”

Before she can finish her sentence, I shove a piece of toast into my mouth, chewing slowly while lifting a brow in challenge.

“Looks like he's a bread man now,” Ruby quips as I do my best not to gag on the mouthful of bread.

“Tubby time,” Whitney speaks up with an eye roll just for me to break our stare off just as Gracie presents the table with the paper-filled Frosty hat. “Not yet, Auntie Whit. It's time to pick a name.”

“Eli picks first,” Ruby speaks up around a forkful of eggs. Gracie brings the hat over to me, and I draw, making sure to use my poker face when I open it.

“Eli, don't tell,” Gracie instructs.

“I'm good at keeping secrets,” I assure her, pocketing my paper.

“So bossy, this one,” Ruby says. “Wonder where she got that?” The entirety of the table looks straight at Serena, who rolls her eyes. Whitney draws and stands, not bothering to glance at her paper before whisking her human shield up the stairs for his bath. I gaze on after her until she disappears out of sight, mind set and up for the challenge.

What are you doing here, Eli?

Maybe you're still the reason, Whitney.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Setting Peyton on the bathroom counter, I pull his arms through his shirt sleeve as Alexa makes another announcement.

Alexa: Announcement: “Leaving in five, kids!”

I can’t help my laugh at Brenden’s audible protest from somewhere in the cabin. Gracie walks into the Jack and Jill bathroom connecting the two upstairs bedrooms, makeup kit in hand, and frowns when she sees I’m ready.

“Auntie Whit, I was going to do your makeup!”

“We’re in a hurry, baby, no time. Tomorrow, okay?”

“Fine,” she says, nodding toward Peyton. “You put his shirt on backward, silly.”

Glancing down, I see the animated Tonka truck on his back and shake my head. “Duh.”

“Duh,” Peyton repeats, and we both giggle. Serena walks in from the bedroom, pulling a brush through her hair. “Gracie, go out there and help grandpa clear the windshields.”

“Gah, I have to do everything!”

“And make sure you have extra pads in your purse, just in case.”

Her face flushes. “Shh, Daddy might hear.” She stomps out of the room as Serena takes a seat next to us on the lid of the toilet.

“Not a chance of reconciliation, huh? You two were looking at each other like you were about to make love.”

“Shut up.”

“Sha up,” Peyton repeats. I wince at Serena, running a dab of gel between my hands before smoothing it over Peyton’s cowlick.

“Sorry.”

Serena ignores my apology. “Fireworks...that’s what that was. It’s so obvious.”

“Speaking of fireworks, what happened when you went to bed last night?”

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

I waggle my brows. “Did you, you know?”

“What? *No*. There’s family in every room of this house.”

“So... Gracie is on a blow-up in the media room, and Peyton’s in the pack n play. It could be fun to sneak it in, literally. I mean, it’s got to be hard to go without, and we’ll be here for another five days—”

“Jesus,” she scoffs, “try *twenty-nine*.”

“What?”

“It’s been twenty-nine days. Sometimes we go over a month.”

She reads my expression. “I know. Not good, right?”

“I’ve never been with a man for more than a decade, so I’m not sure what a good number is, but I’m pretty sure that zero is not the number to aim for.”

She hangs Peyton’s towel on the back door rack. “It’s been this way for a while. He’s like a roommate now.”

“So, shake things up.”

“How exactly am I supposed to do that?”

“You’re asking me?”

“Yeah, I am, Whit. What would you do?”



Standing at the entryway after helping Allen clear the windshields, Ruby sidles up next to me. “Eli, be a dear would you and give Peyton’s coat to Serena.” She hands me the tiny coat. “I’m sure she’s looking for it.”

“No problem.”

After taking the stairs and finding the bedroom empty, I walk through and lift my hand to knock on the slightly ajar bathroom door, pausing when I hear a hushed conversation on the other side.

“It’s just...he’s passive now. He used to call for me to come to bed every single night. Now it’s like he doesn’t care if I’m in there or not.”

“You’ve emasculated him in a teasing way twice since I got here. When is the last time you made him feel like a man?”

“So, this is my fault?”

“We aren’t four. Stop playing the blame game. But let’s choose a starting point. It could be as basic as shaking things up.”

“What do you mean?”

“When is the last time you got your white pants dirty?”

“What?”

“Get on your knees,” Whitney instructs, “and while you do it, look at the man like he is your king, wrap your lips around him, and *suck*.”

Jesus Christ.

“So, you watched or read something that says to degrade yourself to make your husband feel superior?”

“Of course not. You asked for my advice, and I get what you’re saying but hear me out before you go feminist. In my opinion, men need to feel like men in order to *act* like men in the bedroom. You treat a man like a lamb long enough, and he’s less likely to want to roar.”

“What the hell? Where did you get this from?”

“Uh...I think I’m giving mixed advice I’ve gathered over the years. Let’s just start with the special job.”

“You’re seriously telling me a blow job will solve my marital problems?”

“No, this is the attention grabber, you get me?”

Half hard with special job images of the past popping up like cartoon balloons, I weigh my choice to stay or go and decide to listen a little longer. The damage is already done. I can’t help but to think about Whitney and how good it felt when we were together. She never made me feel like anything less than a superman, was always supportive, rarely argumentative, and, if I’m honest, gave the best fucking head of my life.

“You really are a ridiculous encyclopedia of information, Whit.”

“Look at it like this, Thatch bends over backward to be a good husband and father, but I’m sure it puts a drain on the testosterone. Men are truly simple creatures when it comes to sex, especially when deprived of it. Apes, really. It’s a basic primal urge for them, though more emotional for us. That’s not theory. That’s fact. It’s not rocket science. Spice it up. Do something unexpected. Maybe it’s not a solution, but it’s a start. The promise you made to one another goes both ways. Good times and bad, he trusted you to take care of him too, all those years ago.”

“And then he’ll expect it all the time.”

“Just like you expect him to take out the trash, do all the heavy lifting, mow the lawn, and interpret a fifteen-page instructional manual on crap *you ordered* off the internet.”

A pause.

“Don’t look at me like that. I know you do your share too, but where are *his* perks? Doesn’t he deserve them?”

“I’m always the bad guy.”

“No, sis, you’re tired. You’re tired, and you’re starved for affection. But instead of worrying about your own needs for the moment, try to concentrate on his needs and see if that helps spark something. You take the first step and surprise the shit out of him and see what happens. It might be a real turn-on to see his reaction. Don’t go in all half-assed either. Suck that thing like it’s the fountain of youth.”

God help me.

I’m a creeper, a total fucking creeper for listening to this.

“You’re a pervert.”

“And if you ask me, which you are, you’re not perverted enough. You’ve turned into a prude over the years. What could it hurt to—”

“Fine.”

“You’re really going to try?”

“Maybe.”

“Special job aside, is your pride worth it because you couldn’t tell him or show him how important he is to you? This might not help bridge the emotional gap but—”

“You can shut up now.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll admit you might be right, this once.”

“That a girl. Get those knees dirty and then when you have his attention, talk to him, tell him you miss him—”

“Hey man, everything good up here?” Thatch barks from behind me, entering the bedroom as complete and utter silence ensues on the other side of the bathroom door.

Busted.

Congratulating myself on not screaming out like a tween, I do my best to school my face as I glance over at him. “I was just about to knock and make sure they were decent. Ruby wanted me to give Serena Peyton’s jacket.”

“Appreciate it, man.” Thatch takes the jacket and knocks on the parted door. “Everyone dressed?”

“Yeah,” Serena squeaks in reply. When Thatch opens the door, I see two panicked, strikingly similar faces as Peyton greets me from the counter where he sits in front of Whitney, arms flying up. “LIE!”

“Need some saving, bud?” I can’t help my grin as I collect him without protest from either sister.

“You got this?” Thatch asks, and I nod as he hands me back the jacket and lifts a thumb toward the bedroom door. “See y’all downstairs.”

Unable to help myself, I pause at the door and whisper into Peyton’s ear. “Hey, Peyton, can you show Mommy and Auntie Whit how to make a sound like an *ape*?” I pucker my lips exaggeratedly. “Oo, oo, oo.”

“Oo, oo, oo,” Peyton mimics as Whitney’s jaw goes slack and Serena’s face goes beet red. Giving them both a slow wink, I saunter out of the bedroom, little ape in hand.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Alexa: Announcement: “Two-minute warning!”

I stand at the landing of the stairs, mortified by what Eli just overheard as he relinquishes Peyton to Serena in the living room.

The eavesdropping asshole.

“Dad, for Christ’s sake,” Brenden says, heading down the stairs with Conner and Wyatt in tow, “we can hear you without the aid of speakers in every damned room.”

Alexa rings out another announcement.

Alexa: Announcement: “Shut up, son.”

“You’re scaring my children,” he grumbles, hitting the landing and looking between Eli and me as he joins me at the front door. “You two getting along?”

I clap my hands together, cutting them off. “Let’s go!”

Eli opens the door for me, and just as I move to cross the threshold, I’m hit with clean scented cologne as he grips my elbow.

“I was wondering if we could talk later?”

I pull my elbow from his grip, the side of my neck erupting in goosebumps...from the cold, my reply coming out in a venomous whisper. “You know it’s rude to eavesdrop.”

“It was good advice. I’m pretty sure Thatch is going to name you in-law of the year if Serena takes it. And if I may speak from experience—”

“You may not—”

As we step onto the driveway, he leans in on a whisper.

“If *anyone* has authority to give instructions on that *special* job...” He wets his lower lip, drawing my eyes to it. “It’s you.”

His accompanying grin is infuriating. Not only does he look gorgeous in dark jeans, hiking boots, a thermal, and a powder blue sweater vest that brings out his eyes, but it’s impossible not to recall the *special jobs* I gave him back when we were dating. Jobs I gave often, mostly due to his insanely hot reaction and the way he regarded me during. It drove me insane to watch him come undone. Once upon a time, I loved bringing out the primal ape in him. It is clear by the twinkle in his eyes that the asshole is reading the recollection in my expression.

The slamming of the front door and Gracie’s exit has me gritting out my next reply. “Thatch will never, *ever* know that conversation happened, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” His eyes lower as he tries not to smile, his dark blond lashes flitting over his cheekbones. I’d forgotten about the tiny mole on his lash line, the sight of it doing unwelcome shit to me.

Serena and Thatch exit the house with Peyton in tow and follow Gracie down, passing us with curious glances as I lower my voice.

“That was privileged sister shit you tuned into,” I say, keeping my gaze on them as they begin securing Peyton into their SUV. “You had no right.”

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, drawing my eyes back to him. “You look beautiful without all that makeup. A lot less Groucho Marx.”

“I told you why I wore it.”

“Tell me something else, Whitney...”

The way he says my name...too familiar, too intimate. His scent, his eyes, too damned much. Am *I* attention-starved? It’s

only been a month since my breakup. “What?”

“Are you *that* uncomfortable that I’m here? Because if you are—”

“GO TIME!” Allen booms from the front door as Ruby exits the house and locks it behind them, eyeing the two of us. “You two are riding with us since your car is nothing but junk.”

“I just called to have it towed away,” I tell my mother, avoiding Eli’s gaze. “They’re calling me back.”

“What happened to your car?” Eli prods.

“I bought a new one,” I say and shake my head. Fuck this. I’m not posing or lying, or putting on airs. My life is what it is. “I mean, I was going to buy a new one when I got—”

“Promoted?”

“Yeah, anyway, I will be getting a new one after Christmas.”

Walking away to close the subject, I get into the back of my Dad’s SUV, and Eli appears on the other side. After buckling in, he leans toward me. “So?”

“So *what?*”

“Can we talk tonight?”

“About?”

“Just...catching up.”

“Haven’t you *heard* enough?”

“You can’t exactly blame me. After all, I’m just a *simple-minded, emotionless ape* with basic sexual needs. According to you, I shouldn’t be blamed for listening to such primal talk.”

I roll my eyes but can’t stop my smile. Eli leans in further, and I catch another hit of his alluring scent. I’m convinced his sudden appearance is just another test by karma or fate to see if this is the year I break.

Both are out of luck. Firmly I decide that by the 1st of January, I will have conquered every single demon that’s come to dance, including the one sitting to my right. Doing my best not to inhale the stench of Christmas past next to me, I feel him eyeing

my profile as he wordlessly beckons. Unable to escape him due to the confinement, I turn back to meet his goading, icy gaze.

“Come on, Whit, hang with me tonight. Let’s catch up.”

Mom and Dad slip into the car, and Dad turns the engine over, as does the rest of the motorcade.

“I doubt we’ll be able to,” I whisper. “Dads got our holiday agenda mapped out to the minute.”

“Maybe after?”

I keep my tone non-committal. “Maybe.”

“I promise, no monkey business.”

“Cute.”

“I won’t go apeshit on you.”

“Hilarious.”

Once we’re off, my mother sinks into the passenger seat with an exuberant sigh. “You hear that, Allen?”

“What’s that?” Dad asks, eyeing the rearview.

“Nothing. The sound of nothing.” Mom turns back to look at the two of us. “We thought you’d appreciate a kid-free ride, a little silence before the anarchy begins.” She winks, and Dad pulls out of the driveway, mashing the gas and cursing Brenden’s speed ahead of us.

Gazing out the window at the rapidly passing, snow-covered evergreens, I fight the urge to look at Eli and mull over what he could possibly want to talk about. It’s far too late for an apology—the notion itself is ridiculous. If he wants to get along, I’m all for it. Initial shock aside, I’m determined to woman up and just endure this, but anything more than cordial behavior is asking a bit much. Instead of obsessing over it alone, I lift my cell phone to shoot off a text to Alyssa and realize I have zero bars.

“Dad, is there really no cell service here? How have you been sending emails?”

“There is Wi-Fi in the house, but you’re not getting the password. No one is.”

“Seriously, Daddy?”

“December 26th, and not a minute sooner, so if you have emails to send, I suggest you shoot them off in town. You okay with that, Eli?”

“Fine with that, Sir.”

“Call me, Allen.”

“Will do, Allen.”

“Ass-kisser,” I mumble, to which he chuckles in reply. I know for a fact that Eli only has one social media account, LinkedIn, because I have searched a few times over the years. My searches were fruitless, making it clear he never grew out of being an introvert. The shit part is because he is, I was never able to see any recent photos of him. His profile pic was his company logo, which kept the mystery alive. Mystery no more sits next to me now that I know it was a blessing to be in the dark. I was better off not knowing how well he’s taken care of himself, or how incredible he smells, or that my body reacts to him the same way it did when we were in college.

“It’s beautiful here,” Eli remarks as a cluster of overhanging trees give way to a spectacular mountain view, the early morning sun reflecting off the white-tipped branches. “Peaceful.”

Mom turns in her seat. “Being from LA, it must have been something of a culture shock coming out here for college.”

“Actually, I moved to North Carolina when I was thirteen, but yeah, it was a welcome one. Chicago was great for a while, but I like it out here much more.”

“It’s God’s country, isn’t it, sweetheart?” Mom replies. “My Dad always said so.”

Momentarily stunned by her term of endearment, Eli manages to speak up. “It is. So, what are the rules of mystery Rudolph?”

“Pardon?” Mom asks, confused by his abrupt change of subject.

Family was—and seems still is—his favorite topic to evade, future talk a close second. He successfully sidestepped both with me for the entirety of the time we dated. Which, in turn, inevitably broke us up. After, I realized I was subliminally trained in the beginning not to ask. Though we were intimate and at times felt as close as two people could be, after we parted, I

realized I only ever knew the Eli of 2004 and was left mostly in the dark about the twenty-one years of life he lived before me.

Mom takes Eli's cue. "Basically, it's what Gracie told you, you buy for the person you chose to show how well you know them, but in your case, anything will do. The price limit is twenty dollars." Her smile widens. "I can't wait to see what Brenden buys this year."

"I hope like hell Brenden didn't pick me again," Dad says, slowing to a stoplight.

Eli chuckles, the smooth sound ridiculously alluring, and I can't help the intake of cologne before turning my attention back out of the window.

"Spray once, walk through, done," I mutter in exhale.

"What's that?" Eli asks as I shake my head, staring at the snow-dusted church to the left of us. The sign on the marquee out front reading 'Jesus is the reason for the season.' Determined not to inhale fully until safely in town, I speak up. "Are you going to midnight mass this year?"

"Every year, and you know this." Mom answers. "Eli, it's optional for you. And Whitney, if you really want to skip this year, *again*, you can."

"Oh, I am."

Mom twists in her seat to address Eli. "If you're sensing a story there—"

"Don't you dare," I cut in. It's only 10 a.m. on *day one*, and already I want to crawl up into the attic and sleep the rest of the week away.

Eli glances at me gleefully. "This I have to hear."

Mom lets out a devilish laugh. "Are you going to tell him, or do you want me to?"

"I'll take option C. None of the above."

Mom ignores my plea. "Whitney had a little tryst with the Priest's nephew years back, and after, he followed her around like a lost puppy, and she was his missing *bone*."

"Mom!"

“What? It’s true, my little tramp. It took us years to be able to face the congregation after that scandal. My own mother was mortified.”

Face burning, I ignore the icy gaze on my profile as Dad speaks up. “Seriously, Ruby, I know we said we would be hip parents, but that’s taking it a bit too far.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

“Still, it was a hoe thing to do, Sweet Pea,” he adds as the whole SUV—with the exception of me—bursts into laughter.

“You two are assholes,” I mumble. “I thought this was supposed to be a peaceful drive.” I rest my head on the back of the seat while my parents grin at each other as if they’ve been waiting for this moment to punish me.

“Love this one,” Mom says, turning up the radio. Relieved the rehash is over, I feel the sudden shift of energy next to me as Mom begins to sing. It’s only when I turn to see Eli swallow as if he’s in physical pain that I acknowledge him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he answers quickly. Too quickly. He runs his hands along his jeans as steel guitar screeches through the cabin of the SUV. The longer the music plays, the more uncomfortable he grows. Briefly, empathy overrules animosity as I speak up.

“Mom, I had one too many last night. Mind if we turn it down, or off, altogether?”

Annoyed, she glances back at me before obliging and clicking the radio off.

A second later, Eli sputters out a low, “thank you.”

Glancing over, I see sweat beading on his forehead. “Better?”

“I’m good.” Sensing his unease and embarrassment, I can’t help but to cover the hand he’s running along his thigh. Reaction instantaneous, he grips mine with a clammy palm like a lifeline, and my heart starts a steady gallop. It’s when I lift my eyes to his that my well-intended gesture backfires.

Bang.

It's there, the same raw vulnerability I saw glimpses of when we were dating, which only made me fall for him harder. It's the false security he blanketed me with after those rare moments that has me backtracking as I pull my hand out of his.

Instantly his eyes drop, and he remains quiet the rest of the ride to town.



Freezing, we all huddle around Dad at the edge of the square parking lot as he barks out rehearsed orders. “Gracie, you are with grandma and me. The rest of you spread out. Eli, if you want, you can pair up with Whitney since she’s familiar with the shops—”

“I’m good on my own,” he replies hastily, and I let out a sarcastic harrumph which he doesn’t miss. He just held my hand like it mattered to him—a moment of weakness on his part that appears already forgotten. Thatch curses at the stroller he’s trying to unravel, and Eli steps in, surprisingly opening it up with ease. Brenden loads up his own twin stroller with Wyatt and Conner as Erin helps.

“One hour and we meet for lunch,” Dad instructs.

Without glancing back, especially in Eli’s direction, I start my trek down Main Street on a mission to be my mother’s perfect mystery Rudolph. Checking my phone, I see a few bars and decide to use them to call Alyssa and fill her in on the last twenty-four hours. If anyone can fully appreciate this situation, it’s her. She answers on the second ring.

“About time, I’ve been texting you—”

“I just got all forty of them,” I interject, “the service at the cabin is shit, and Dad’s refusing to give up the Wi-Fi code. So, Merry Christmas in advance.”

“Gah, I miss Christmases with your family. I would trade places in a heartbeat. The in-laws are arriving any moment.”

After college, Alyssa’s life exploded. Not just career-wise, but personally. She ventured off to England for the summer—a

graduation present from her parents—but never used the return ticket. Within a month, she found a job as a buyer for one of the biggest department stores in London, where she met her husband, who she now lives with, along with their two children, forty-five minutes outside of the city. We’ve managed to get together once every few years and surprisingly never lost touch.

Alyssa is the friend I can neglect without paying a penalty and vice versa. Space and time don’t matter. On this particular day though, I wish it was as simple as a short drive to get to her.

“So, how’s it going?”

“It’s not. I didn’t get the promotion.”

“Oh, babe, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I think I’m past the first three stages of grief. Oh, and Brenden brought a friend from work to spend Christmas with us.”

“Oh yeah, is he—”

“Eli.”

“Eli?”

“Eli.”

A short pause.

“What?! And you led with the promotion?!”

“I wanted that promotion so much.”

“I know, babe, and I’m sorry, but *Eli*? What in the ever-loving hell was Brenden thinking?”

“I know, and he’s been all blasé about it, like I’m being childish.”

“That bumbling idiot.”

“Right? I so needed to hear your voice.”

“Okay, I need wine. You grab a glass, too.”

“I wish. I’m pressed for time. I have fifty-five minutes to mystery Rudolph shop.”

“Right, so let’s get down to the important shit. First, how does he look? Please tell me he looks like Benjamin Button, the

infant, and has a beer gut.”

“Nope. And if he were going gray, which he isn’t, he would be the definition of a silver fox.”

“Bastard.”

“He is. But I’m trying to be mature about the whole thing.”

“Like, how did this even happen?”

“Brenden brought him on as a consultant a few months ago. Apparently, Eli’s working on some groundbreaking investment app for his firm.”

“Did he know you were Brenden’s sister?”

“Yep, and he admitted as much. He wasn’t at all surprised to see me when I greeted him with a face full of Gracie caked makeup.”

“Oh shit.”

“She’s getting better.”

“Sure she is if you like looking like a Tim Burton extra.”

“Be nice.”

“Fine.”

“So, Serena went all...*Serena* and asked him if he knew, and she said he wouldn’t answer her.”

“Which means he purposely came to see you.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I would. The question is, why now?”

“Who knows. The holidays do strange shit to people. We’re both getting older, maybe he’s finally feeling guilty about the women he’s jilted in the past, and I’m door number one. Maybe he wants absolution.”

“Which you won’t give.”

“I don’t know. It seems ridiculous to hold a grudge now. He’s been nothing but nice to my family, to me, since he got here. Maybe I should just meet him halfway.”

“Or maybe you should rubber band his testicles and make them a punching bag. Whitney, what he did, the way he treated

you in the end was unforgivable.”

“I know, and I don’t understand him. I guess I never really did.”

“Well, I was *there*, and I’m telling you anything you feel is justified.”

“It’s kind of childish to grudge him though now, isn’t it?”

“For anyone else, maybe I would agree, but you two were relationship goals, and the way he did you, just...I still hate him for it. And...”

“And what?”

“You haven’t really let yourself get attached like that since him.”

“No woman does after their first love. Not the same way. It’s a good thing.”

“Baby, I hate saying this, but in *your* case, no, it’s really not.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you’re a romantic.”

Momentarily I’m stunned speechless.

“So, you’re stuck with him for how long?”

“Day after Christmas, and that’s if he stays the whole time.”

“This is some shit. What I wouldn’t give to be there.”

“Trust me, Serena has the mean, crazy, protective sister role covered.”

“How do you really feel?”

Stopping my walk, I turn toward the window display of the General Store. “Honestly, seeing him again after all this time is surreal. Sadly, I’m still crazy attracted to him. Memories I spent years forgetting are coming at me left and right. It’s like when he’s close...no time has passed at all.”

“Oh, shit.”

“I’m in no danger, not like *that*.”

“Famous last words.”

“He’s still keeping his cards close. Refusing to get personal in conversations. Still the same Eli.”

“Remember that. Use it.”

“Trust me. I can’t forget.”

“I guess all you can do is take it day by day.”

“He’s been trying to talk to me, I think to apologize, and I’ve been snubbing him. Maybe I should hear him out?”

“Maybe. When you’re ready, listen to what he has to say, and this advice is purely selfish because I myself would love to hear it after all these years. Just be honest with yourself and with him. And you damn well better find a way to report back to me. I don’t care if it’s Morse code.”

“I miss you.”

“You too, babe. Happy Christmas!” She exclaims in her terrible British accent.

I snort. “You’re still American, you know.”

“Babe, I’ve been in England now half as long as I’ve been alive.”

“Damn, that’s true. Where did the time go?”

“Straight to my tits.”

“Ditto. Oh, and I brought all my frump clothes and baggy sweats.”

“So, you *do* want something to happen.”

“No, but who wants to look like a bag lady in front of their ex?”

“True. Well, it looks like you have a lot of shopping to do. I so miss holidays with your folks. There was never a dull moment.”

“Nothing’s changed in that respect. Trust me. We’re one clown car away from a full-blown circus. Gracie got her first period, so there’s that.”

“Holy shit. I feel for you. I really do.”

“There is an upside. Dad put Eli in the King’s luxury suite.”

“Ha! I love it...Whit, you sure you’re okay?”

“I am, really. I’m going to turn this around. All of it. I’ve just got a little mental rehabbing to do.”

“Well, hang in there, babe. In a way, this is a good dose of karma. He deserves to see what he lost out on. If you decide to hear him out, you earned whatever apology he gives.”

“I’m just going to have to forgive him at this point. It’s better for us both.”

“Your ability to do that is one of the best things about you. Love you.”

“Love you. Merry Christmas. Kiss Darrin and the kids for me.”

“Will do and Whitney...”

“Yeah?”

“Trust me when I say if he’s there to see you, he regrets it. Take comfort in that over everything else. You’re irreplaceable. Oh, God, that’s the door. I’ll pray for us both.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Glancing at my watch, I begin to panic when I see I lost too much time power walking down Main Street in order to burn off the rest of my panic attack. It still amazes me how I'm triggered by specific sounds. To this day, it's noise—the loud clang of a pan, the slam of a door that sends me into an unwanted panic. It's infuriating that no matter how strong my mental state or how hard I've fought to reverse my introvert's aversion to crowds and noise, it can still paralyze me with anxiety.

Using the breathing techniques I mastered, I gradually immerse myself back into my surroundings. Steps slow, images disperse from my racing mind as my heart rate evens out, and I'm finally able to take in the scenery surrounding me. Ears perking up, I tune into the human noise. The ringing of the Salvation Army bell, the faint sounds of engines as cars pass. My heavy footfalls lighten as I focus and soak in the square.

Downtown Triple Falls is idyllic, sort of Norman Rockwell in feel, and I instantly fall in love with it. Weather bundled shoppers march down the snow-lined sidewalks as rows upon rows of glass storefronts twinkle and shimmer with décor catered to the season. It's just like I imagined it would be, the exact picture Whitney painted when she spoke fondly of Christmases in North Carolina spent with her grandparents. Ready to face the task at hand, I

enter a specialty boutique and begin rummaging through a sweater rack, knowing it's the worst possible place to start.

A sweater says nothing at all about how well you know a person. It's a cop-out present, and I refuse to go out like that. Maybe I don't know Whitney now, but today, she's acting more like the girl I chased after, if just a little subdued.

In some ways, I'm still the same guy she dated, but I've been trying to remedy the separation of the two lives I lived. One life I purposefully hid from her, the other I started just before I met her, before pushing her out of both altogether.

Whitney shared everything with me when we dated—her body, her heart, her secrets, her fears, her future hopes—while I clammed up repeatedly, denying her and ultimately hurting her. She displayed the same selfless nature back in the car when she took my hand, her face etched with concern *for me*. In doing so, she helped me back away a step from the freefall, her presence and understanding enough to eradicate the worst of it.

Annoyed by my blatant display and embarrassed, I had to get the fuck away from her to collect myself. I could've chosen that time to be honest, but I know my words would have come out a jumbled mess, and it wasn't the right time. Intent on my mission to find the perfect peace offering, I curse when I look around the shelves and come up empty. With the clock ticking out and only minutes to spare, I yank an expensive cashmere scarf from a rack and check out, knowing I can gift it to Erin if all else fails, and vow to figure something better out.

It's when I turn to exit the store that I see Whitney lingering at the entrance, cellphone to her ear, expression wary, her hand on the door handle as she speaks to whoever is on the other side of the line.

Briefly, I wonder if her conversation has anything to do with me, but it would be both presumptuous and asinine to think I mattered enough to be the subject of it.

Ready for another attempt, when she steps into the shop, I meet her at the door. When her eyes lift to mine, I hate the hesitation in her gaze. It's as if a flip switches when she surprises me by flashing me a genuine smile while ending her call with a "thanks so much. I appreciate it."

“Hey.”

“Hi,” she nods toward my bag. “I see you got lucky.”

“It was easy.” Lie.

“Easy? You hardly know my family.”

“I picked you.” Truth.

“You’re not supposed to tell.”

“I would have shopped with you otherwise...I didn’t want you thinking I—”

“It’s fine. I wasn’t offended.” Now *she’s lying*. This can’t be the way this continues. Even if being polite makes the situation more bearable for us both, I refuse to do it a second longer or let her do it, either. I decide on truth bombs from this moment on. Brutal honesty may be the only way I’ll be able to get through to her.

“Thanks for what you did, back there—”

“No need to thank me,” she says softly.

“I disagree. Thank you,” I whisper again, adamant she hears me.

“No worries...well, I don’t have much time left,” she darts her eyes past my shoulder, looking for an escape route.

I gesture to her hand full of bags. “Looks like you did well yourself.”

“Don’t judge. I have a Christmas fund.”

“I remember. You spoiled me with it once. And you still didn’t answer my question.”

“Eli—”

“Can we talk later, no bullshit?”

“Look,” she tugs at the brim of her beanie, her nose and cheeks red from the cold. “I don’t think it’s going to help anything to rehash ancient history. It’s best if we just don’t go there. I’m running out of time.”

“So am I. I’ve got five days to get you to talk to me without that ‘you’re an asshole’ look in your eye.”

“You can’t bully me into a conversation. That’s my decision.”

“True,” I step closer, forcing her against a shelf full of sweaters. “Ancient history it may be, but not all of it was bad...” I pick up a lock of champagne-colored hair from her shoulder and rub it between my fingers. “It’s hard not to remember, isn’t it? Especially when we’re this close.”

“Remember what?”

“You know damn well what.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Uh huh. My Adam’s apple appreciates your attention, but I would prefer you look at me.”

“You’re in my personal space.”

“Can’t say it doesn’t feel good to be back here.”

I grin as her eyes narrow when she lifts her gaze. “There you are.”

“Are you seriously coming onto me right now?”

“Maybe.” My eyes drop to her glossy lips, and my cock twitches. It’s the second time I’ve been hard for her in less than twenty-four hours. Not a first, not with her. “Let’s compromise, we can table *that* conversation, and I can get to know you again. But if memory serves, we never could last long in a room together.” I lower my voice. “You can pretend all you want that I haven’t been *inside you*, but I refuse to.”

She gapes at me, her eyes widening. “You did not just say that.”

“I did. Don’t you think we’re a bit old for games?”

“I’m not playing games, you ass. I just don’t see the point in talking about it. It’s a little late, Eli, don’t you think?”

“We’re still breathing, and our hearts are still beating. So, no, I don’t think it’s too late.”

She scoffs. “And what exactly are you thinking, *Casanova*?” She drawls icily—knowing I hate the nickname—before jerking her chin toward the shelf behind her. “You want to skip the

pleasantries and bend me over these discounted sweaters for old times' sake?"

"Tempting." I bend so we're eye level. "I know you remember us."

"Oh, I remember *you*."

"That felt like an insult."

"What can I say. You're representing your *inner ape* well."

"Fair enough, you're right." I lift my palms to her before shoving them into my pockets. If she's going to play indifferent for the next five days, this might be my only chance for appeal.

"I didn't come here with a single expectation, and that's the honest truth. Maybe I don't know who you are now," I swallow and lean in, speaking from a place I fought hard to come to terms with, "but right now, I'm talking to the girl who loved me and left me for good reason. I would love the chance to talk to her, to explain myself to her. But mostly, I just want to tell her that I'm sorry."

I back away slowly, and her doe eyes search mine for sincerity I'm certain I'm conveying because it's the truth. Sweeping her from head to foot, I step back. "It's *really good* to see you again, Whitney."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The jingle of the store bell marks Eli’s absence as I reel in the aftermath of the explosion that occurred in my chest. I glance around the store as people carry on with their shopping as if nothing happened. And for them, it didn’t. But me? I heard words I dreamt of hearing for *years* from a man I never imagined would utter them.

Stay strong, Whitney. Nostalgia is a trap. It’s a trap!

Panicking, I begin pacing the store, begging my inner Scrooge to come and zap the emotions warring in my chest and the waking ache in my core. The man has me needing a mop-up on aisle ‘what the fuck just happened,’ and every part of me is aching to go after him for more words as he strides away from the store. Eli was never a words man, not in the way that truly mattered. Our attraction back then was impossible to ignore—though we tried—and it seems no less potent now. But those words, the look in his eyes.

“You can pretend all you want that I haven’t been inside you, but I refuse to.”

I can still feel his radiating warmth despite the gush of icy air that drifted into the shop with his departure.

This isn’t happening.

I won't let it happen. It's not so much the time that's passed, but the remembrance of the damage inflicted when we broke up. Alyssa is right. I never quite trusted the same, loved the same. But isn't that the way it's supposed to be? You get your heart good and broken in, and then you let it fuel your future decisions about relationships. It's the way of it. You get stronger and demand more for yourself. It's not like Eli set a high bar.

Liar.

Feeling the tick of the clock and knowing my mother deserves a well-thought-out gift for all her effort to make our Christmas perfect, guilt consumes me. For most of the hour, I shopped for figure-flattering clothes to look more presentable, if not a bit more alluring.

My priorities are already shifting due to this ridiculousness.

Irritated and full-on panicking by the way I'm already behaving, I begin sorting through the costume jewelry, looking for anything Mom might consider sentimental. Damn Eli and his disruption, his beautiful eyes, lips, and words.

Been inside you. Inside you. Inside you.

It's been too many years since I've felt that sort of jolt, since my heart pounded so fast with anticipation and sexual tension, since my romance starved imagination went as wild as a young twenty-something C cup at Mardi Gras.

And fuck the girl inside of me that's ready to lift her shirt, titties blazing at the first sign of plastic beaded promises.

Day one. He's pulling this on day *one*?

"Argh," I cry out in exasperation as a woman jumps in surprise next to me.

"Sorry," I mutter, averting my attention to the shelves of Hallmark jewelry with heartfelt quotes that ring insincere to me.

The clock runs out as I spot something that may work and snatch it off a shelf with a second to spare, knowing the scarf I knitted her would suffice as a good backup gift—because I'm a woman who knits now. My bra and underwear drawer are organized, as is my condo. I'm no longer the beer-slurping party girl he tamed regularly with his huge...ego. I've changed even if

he's still the same highly seductive, manipulative, ticking time bomb he was when we were together.

Relieved I was able to find something—and dead set on steering clear of Eli and any more of his reminiscent conversation—I check out and head toward the restaurant.

I manage to keep my pace steady as I spot my family eating chips and queso as Eli finds me at the hostess stand, his eyes pinning me while in conversation with Dad. The seat next to his the only one vacant. It's the look in his eyes that gives me pause. Hopeful. I'm not emotionally equipped to deal with his baggage. I have my own carousel to sort out. Despite what felt like a sincere apology, I'm not going back there with him. He's nearly two decades too late. Here, in the present, the promotion, my personal circumstances, it's all temporary. Just another phase. It's time to let go of it all. And my new mindset starts with unleashing unnecessary baggage, including old hurts.

I got an apology from him, and I'll accept it. It's as simple as that. We can co-exist for the remainder of five days. Feeling lighter, I find a little bounce in my step by the time I make it to the table and greet the family, kissing my nieces and nephews on the way to my chair. Unflinching, I meet Eli's probing gaze as I discard my purse and bags. The second I take the seat next to him, I can see his read on my decision and his disappointment. Opening my menu, I turn to him, resolute.

“Apology accepted. We were just kids, Eli. Let's let it go and have a good Christmas, okay?”

He offers a solemn nod as I peruse my menu and see his gaze linger briefly before he speaks up. “Okay.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Coming on to her was my first mistake. It's the only behavior I've displayed that warranted the steel resolve I encountered in the few minutes it took her to get to the restaurant. I had no fucking right to say the things I said, to presume I mattered to her that way. In the past, I gave her everything but words and assurances for the future. But my first hard lesson was that words matter, something I've been confronted with over the years again and again through my failed relationships. Even if actions speak louder, words fucking matter.

“Did either of you get lucky?” Allen asks as we make our way back to the cabin.

“I did okay, I think,” Whitney speaks up, her voice chipper.

“Same,” I reply, doing my best to hide the burn of the rejection due to her brushoff. I scroll through my phone to keep my hands busy and see a missed text from Evie.

Evie: Hey you. How is it going?

Good.

Evie: Which means not good. Have you told her the truth yet?

She's not having it. I don't know why I let you talk me into this.

Evie: I didn't talk you into shit. All I did was keep you from backing out.

She wants nothing to do with me.

Evie: I told you it wouldn't be easy. What did you expect?

I don't know. I'm thinking about bailing. Mind calling and giving me an excuse to jet?

Evie: This is the opposite of what you set out to do, and that isn't who you are anymore. Correction, it isn't who you want to be, remember? Your words, not mine.

I know. You're right.

Evie: Then see this through.

I'm telling you it feels pointless.

Evie: Do you really want to leave?

Her family is amazing. We're getting along well.

Evie: Out with it, Eli.

Biting my lip, I glance over at Whitney, who's mindlessly sorting through her purchases before typing back.

No, I don't want to leave. I'm still crazy attracted to her, and we haven't even had a real conversation. But I fucked up and came onto her like an idiot, and she shut down. The crazy part? I know she feels it too.

Evie: Figure out a way to get the truth out. Blurt it if you have to. Or do you want to regret it for seventeen more years?

That's a bit dramatic.

Evie: I just want my best friend happy. I think you need this more than you realize. I'm here if you need me.

Did I ever tell you that you're the best ex-girlfriend a guy could ask for?

Evie: Many times. I just wish you would have been this worthy when we dated.

Sorry.

Evie: I'm really not. I got the husband of my dreams after dusting you. Besides, I wasn't the girl you wanted to be worthy of. And you are worthy, Eli, so very worthy.

It's too late. This is fucking crazy.

Evie: Just try to be her friend if you can manage that, make the best of your time there, tell her the truth, and go home.

10/4

Evie: I'm sorry, Eli.

Kicking back in my seat, I flit my gaze out the window as my thoughts drift as they have so many times since I saw the picture in Brenden's living room.

"I'm sorry?" Whitney gapes at me as I grip her arm and steer her down the hallway toward the exit.

"That's twice you've stood me up," I say, bursting out the side door as she gawks at the hand I have encircling her arm.

"Well, accosting me on campus isn't going to change my mind."

Releasing her, I crowd her a little against the building, determined to get an explanation as more students file out of the door. Despite our foot difference in height and my pissed expression, she stares up at me with a mix of amusement and satisfaction. She's loving every second of this.

"Tell me what your problem is."

"My problem?" She presses a hand to her chest. "You're the one who can't take a hint."

"And you're the one wearing an inch-long skirt because you know I have a thing for your legs."

"Wow, you're reaching."

"Am I? Fine. Let's say you aren't bullshitting. At least have the decency to tell me why I've spent two hours of my life staring at the entrance of the coffee house wondering why I'm unworthy of your time and attention."

"Two words, Campus Casanova."

“Jesus, really?” I’ve heard it more than once, especially during track season last year, and somehow it stuck. “That’s bullshit based on absolutely zero fact.”

She shrugs. “Rumors are often based on some version of the truth.”

“Fine, I want my sweatshirt back.”

Her eyes dim. “Well, you’re not getting it.”

“Whatever, take care, Whitney.”

Regripping my backpack, I turn and make it mere feet away before she speaks up. “I’m not a one-and-done-girl.”

Turning, I see her legs are stinging red due to the cold and take a step toward her.

“A date, that’s all I asked for, and I’m not even sure I like you anymore.”

She grins. “Then this date isn’t going well already.”

“Nuh huh, I’m picking a new time, new place.”

“Fine, where?”

“I’ll let you know. And wear pants, you know, just to be on the safe side,” I quip, letting her see my exaggerated eye roll before I turn and walk off.

“Hey, Casanova,” she calls, clear flirtation in her voice as I fake annoyance, looking back at her over my shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Were you really going to give up?”

She shivers in the cold as I slide my gaze down her frame, “I guess you’ll never know.”

The close of the SUV doors prompts my own exit as Whitney follows her parents toward the front door of the cabin. Halfway up the steps, Whitney glances back at me, and I’m right back there, staring at her in her inch-long skirt, asking myself the same question as she looks at me thoughtfully before she turns and heads into the house. My answer rings in as clearly as it did on campus that day as I walked back to my apartment.

Fuck no.



“Could you hand me some gumdrops, Eli?” Gracie asks as she plasters her gingerbread house with more frosting. Even so, it’s clear to me it’s not her first rodeo by the way she’s expertly piping it on with the baker’s bag.

“Sure.” I hand her the bag of sugared gumdrops—the table cluttered full of Gingerbread house supplies—before adding the last of the roofing to the second floor of my gingerbread house. Ruby set up the table while she prepped dinner, demanding we make a house the old school way, ‘without the fancy kits they have nowadays.’ I rolled up my sleeves, ready for the challenge, and determined to win the grand prize—the first cup of snowman soup, which is apparently the world’s best hot chocolate.

Since we began constructing our houses, the friendly family competition seems to have kicked up a notch as I scan the faces of those at the table. Conner decided to pair up with Peyton—which prematurely ended with them both covered in icing—and Serena whisked them into the tub within minutes of their start. Allen disappeared just after shopping, and Brenden opted for a recliner nap with Wyatt. Erin decided to do some wrapping, which left the four of us remaining, Thatch included.

Whitney sits across from me, a tiny part of her pink tongue clamped between her teeth, her brows knit in concentration, her expression much the same as it was when we studied together in college. Hands busy, fiercely determined, she ignores her surroundings. With everyone distracted, I study her unabashedly while sinking into another memory of our beginning.

“Do you want to come in?” Whitney asks as we approach her apartment door.

“Maybe some other time,” I say, squeezing her hand.

“Okay, Casanova, what gives?” Whitney stops just outside her apartment door and turns to me expectantly.

“I wish you would stop calling me that,” I retort dryly. “And what do you mean what gives?”

“This.” She lifts our clasped hands. “This is what I mean. We’ve been on four dates, and all you’ve done is hold my hand.”

“For a girl who was certain she was just going to be another conquest for me, you sure this isn’t moving too fast?”

“I’m just wondering what the deal is.”

“Maybe I like holding your hand.” I shrug, and her nostrils flare in annoyance.

“I’m not like complaining or anything—”

“You clearly are. You want a kiss? That’s what you’re griping about?”

“Not if you don’t want to kiss me.”

“All right then.” I nod toward her door. “Goodnight.”

“But you do want to kiss me. I can tell. You stare at my lips all the time.”

“That’s because you gloss them up like a porn star. They’re kind of hard to ignore.”

She jerks her hand out of my grip. “Okay, I’m confused. Are you still pissed about the two dates I stood you up for—”

“Ah, so she finally admits she stood me up.”

“Are you trying to prove something here?” I fight the urge to survey her again in tattered jeans and an off-the-shoulder pink sweater. She had the good sense to ditch skirts due to the rapidly cooling weather, but her appeal is no less alluring.

“I’m not bitching about bases. I’d just like to know if you’re planning on stepping up to bat.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

“Or maybe I’m just wasting good lip gloss,” she mumbles, opening her purse and digging for her keys, “Trey Rhodes, my first kiss, in first grade, moved faster than you.”

“That so?”

“It’s so.” She pauses with a hand in her purse and blinks up at me. “So, what’s the holdup?”

“I’m getting to it. I heard you, Whitney, you want a kiss.”

“But not if you don’t want to.”

“Heard that part too.”

“Ugh.” She narrows her eyes at me. “Are you just messing with me?”

“I’m dating you.”

“So, we are dating?”

“Was that unclear?”

“And you want to kiss me.”

“Not right now.”

“Wow, you’re arrogant.”

“Because I don’t kiss on demand?”

“Because you think I’ll wait around forever for it.”

“Four dates is forever?”

“Jesus, forget it.” Retrieving her keys, she turns toward her door, her back to me. Unable to help myself despite my resolve, I step forward, pinning her against her front door, my body encasing hers. Inhaling her scent, I place my palm next to her head and lean in. Goosebumps erupt on her bare shoulder as I skim it with my lips. Her breath comes out in a whoosh before she turns her head, her eyes zeroing in on my lips. I can’t help my grin as I inch in, watching her chest rise and fall. “Ask me nicely, Whitney.”

“For a kiss? You want me to ask you nicely for a kiss?” Her chest pumps harder as I bend so our noses brush, barely.

“Yeah, for a kiss.”

“Look, pal, I don’t do mind control.”

“Or one-night stands, or mushrooms, or jazz music—”

“Because it’s not music,” she states as if it’s obvious.

“Uh huh, I heard you. You also, at times, use movie titles as a verb. You talk a lot. Very informative.”

“Someone has to try to fill the long silences. If you ask me, you don’t talk enough.”

“Well, who’s asking you?”

Her golden-brown eyes flare.

“As it happens, I like hearing you talk. Now, ask me to kiss you, Whitney.”

Her pupils dilate when I grip her wrist and slowly brush my thumb over the delicate skin. Turning to face me, she runs her nails up my chest as I cup her cheek, stroking beneath her glossy lower lip as she runs her tongue along it.

“Will you kiss me, Eli?”

“Okay,” I agree, dipping and running my nose along hers. Standing in wait, her eyes flutter closed. When I remain idle, she opens one eye and narrows it like a cartoon cat spotting a mouse prancing by.

“Goodnight, Whitney,” I murmur before I kiss her cheek, turn, and head towards the elevator.

“Oh, you’re an asshole,” she calls after me.

“An asshole you just asked to kiss you,” I taunt.

“Well, you can forget it. I won’t ask again.”

“That would be moot anyway because you already did.”

“You’re infuriating.”

I glance back at her after pushing the down button. “And you’re incredibly beautiful.”

Her expression softens briefly before she shakes her head in annoyance and practically kicks open her front door.

“I’ll call you later,” I call out just before she slams it.

“I think it’s safe to say Eli is our winner,” Ruby says, wiping her hands on a towel as she observes our table. Thatch kicks back in annoyance, his blueprint for his own mega-mansion poorly executed. “This is horseshit. I came in fifteen minutes late.”

“Daddy, that’s not nice. You wouldn’t have won anyway. Eli’s house is awesome.”

“Thanks, Gracie,” I say as Thatch sighs, eyeing my gingerbread mansion. “Yeah, I must admit, for a first-timer, you really did the damn thing.”

“Thanks.”

Ruby eyes the rest of the houses on the table. “Gracie, you come in second place. Second cup is yours.”

“Yay, thanks, Grammy!”

Whitney eyes my house, and I press my lips together as her nostrils flare, competitive fire fizzling as she starts to clean her side of the table.

“I’m busy with dinner,” Ruby adds, “be a dear, Sweet Pea and make his victory cup for him.”

Whitney opens her mouth and clamps it shut before sliding back in her chair and standing.

“I’ll help, Auntie Whit,” Gracie offers gleefully.

“I need your help,” Ruby says, “go grab an apron, baby.”

“But Grammy, I wanted to help—”

“Now, Gracie,” Thatch snaps, adding the last of the gumdrops to his house.

“Fine,” she huffs, stomping into the kitchen as Thatch glances up, his eyes hardening.

“I’m okay with getting mine last,” I say, glancing up at Whitney while stuffing the unused crackers in a zip lock bag. “I don’t at all mind waiting.”

Whitney lifts her eyes to mine, and I feel her brush off at my double entendre before she speaks.

“Rules are rules,” she mutters before taking off toward the kitchen.

“Man, the temp just lowered like ten degrees in here,” Thatch says with a chuckle as he turns to me. “What exactly happened between you two?”

Everything.

In truth, for me, it was too much, too soon. Mulling over a way to convey that to Thatch without sounding like the self-absorbed ass I was, I’m saved when Serena walks in and deposits a freshly bathed Peyton into Thatch’s lap.

“This kid is yours for the next hour,” she says warily, “minimum.”

Thatch rescues his house as Peyton lunges for it, his fast reaction saving Peyton another bath as he whisks the baby from the table. Conner approaches, hair wet and in fresh pajamas, eyes widening when she sees my construction before brief disappointment fills her light brown eyes.

“Just in time,” I say, grabbing some of the unbagged supplies. I gesture for her to come closer. “You want to help me finish? I could use a little help with the walkway.” Conner’s answering smile is all the help I need as she moves toward the table and gingerly takes the seat next to me. Whitney enters the room, and I see her pause in my peripheral before she sets a steaming mug of snowman soup in front of me.

“Congrats, Eli,” she says without a hint of grudge in her tone.

“Thank you,” I say, meeting her eyes briefly before I push the oversized cup toward Conner. “Mind drinking this for me? I don’t want to hurt Ruby’s feelings, but I don’t eat much chocolate.”

Conner’s eyes widen as she glances at the concoction before nodding enthusiastically. I feel Whitney’s eyes on me briefly before Conner and I get to work.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“That was really nice,” I say, glancing over at Eli, where we stand perched at the kitchen sink. “What you did for Conner.”

“It was nothing,” Eli says as I hand him a freshly washed plate.

“She’s so shy...I worry sometimes.”

“I was too,” Eli says easily.

“You? *You* were shy?”

“Yeah, I was, especially when I was her age. She might just need a little longer to come out of her shell. The right person will come along one day and bring it out of her.”

“You sound sure.”

“Because I’m speaking from experience.” He swallows and glances around the kitchen. “You weren’t exaggerating. Your family really goes all out.”

I can’t help my pride-filled smile. “But it’s cool, right?”

His eyes glimmer with appreciation as he scans the fully decked-out kitchen while I study the hard lines of his jaw. Lines he’s grown further into since our time together. “Yeah, yeah...it really is, but you know I don’t see any Santa de—”

“Shhhh,” I admonish, eyes widening. “And you won’t. St. Nick is Peyton’s arch-nemesis. He *hates* him. Any mention of that jolly old bastard and he’ll go psycho baby like Damien in the Omen scary. There was a thing at the mall last year, and let’s just say it wasn’t pretty. I have no idea how he still remembers it, but it’s ingrained in him.”

He chuckles, the sound smooth and inviting. I study him briefly until he glances at me. Looking out of the window, I catch our reflection which is illuminated by the twinkling bulbs intertwined with tinsel outlining the pane. It’s intimate in feel due to it being the only light in the kitchen. When his eyes meet mine in the window, I drop them to the dish I’m scrubbing.

Even with his cologne fading, I can still catch whiffs of it as his arm brushes mine. Dinner was uneventful, aside from Peyton’s sleepy meltdown due to him missing his nap this afternoon. He refused to eat, demanding to watch the Lion King on Thatch’s iPad, to which Thatch easily gave into despite Serena’s protest, the tension between them uncomfortably palpable.

The house is eerily calm for the moment, with everyone gathered in the living room in different states of a dinner-induced coma. Glancing over, I nudge Eli’s shoulder as he buffs another plate dry. “Your parents didn’t decorate?”

He pauses his hands briefly, and I shake my head. “Never mind.”

He surprises me by speaking up.

“Not like yours. If I’m honest, they didn’t really get a chance to.”

“How so?”

“When we lived in LA...well, did I ever tell you my Dad was a lawyer?”

I nod. One of the very few details I got from him about his parents.

“He was a good one. He had a lot of high-profile clients, and my mother spent a ton of time catering to them as well. She was a bit of a socialite—and not much of a homemaker—so we kind of had our decorating done for us.”

“Rich kid, huh?”

“I mean, yeah, I guess I was, but it was kind of the norm where we lived. At times, it felt a lot like it looked—*plastic*.”

Glancing over at him, I notice his expression is much the same as it was back when I braved questions when we were together. The difference is now, he’s answering.

“He was always working—”

“This is the last of them,” Serena interrupts, eyeing us both suspiciously as she deposits a small pile of dishes on the counter. “You two need any help?”

“We’re good,” Eli elbows me. “Aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” I agree. We’ve made small talk for a majority of the time we’ve been in here, and it’s been, for the most part, easy. Hope springs inside me that we may get through the rest of our time together without incident.

“Uh huh,” Serena says, her tone both accusatory and annoying. “I guess I’ll wipe the table.”

Squeezing out a rag, I toss it at her in warning. It slaps her chest with a soap-filled thud as she glares at me. “Unnecessary,” she barks.

“My thoughts exactly, *helicopter*.”

Eli chuckles, and I shake my head as Serena stalks out, muttering under her breath about being underappreciated.

“Do yourself a favor and just ignore her. We all do.”

“I like that she’s protective of you.”

Pausing briefly, I decide not to decipher his comment and grab the plates, dropping them into the water.

“So, what’s up for tomorrow?” Eli asks just as I go to prompt him for more about his parents. Instead, I give him the easy out.

“Didn’t you get the mission statement and Google doc?”

Eli raises both brows, and I grin.

“I think Mom and Dad are taking us all snow tubing on Moonshine Mountain.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I love the snow. Colorado was my playground for a few years. But if I’m honest, my favorite place was the slopes in Switzerland.”

“Wow, you’ve been around, huh?”

“I globe trotted for a while. You?”

“Never got around to it.”

His expression turns pained as he refrains from speaking.

“Oh, spit it out, Welch.”

“I’m just disappointed... *for you.*”

“Dude, I’m not dead yet.”

“You had a *birthday* bucket list,” he reminds me.

“If I remember correctly, it was a list you deemed *reckless and ambitious.*”

“I did. Some of that shit was crazy dangerous.”

“Yeah,” I grin. “Skydiving at twenty-three.”

“I did,” he says softly.

I frown. “You did what?”

“I skydived when I turned twenty-three.”

I gawk at him. “You’re kidding.”

“Got a tattoo on my twenty-fourth.”

“That was supposed to be my *tattoo* birthday. What does that mean anyway?”

“What’s what mean?”

Shit. His tattoo, if I mention it, he’ll know I saw him without a shirt on.

“I mean, did you steal my list or something?” *Good recovery, Whit.*

His lips upturn. “Maybe I stole a few.”

“I guess that’s...flattering.”

I’m jealous.

Just a little.

“Well it’ll be even cooler to dive on my fortieth birthday.”

He gives me an infuriating sideways glance that tells me he knows I’m full of shit. Sadly, he’s right. There’s no way in hell I’m jumping out of an airplane at this stage in my life. My birthday bucket list was overly ambitious. But at the time, I intended to follow through with every single one. And then...life.

“So, did you do any of them?”

“I don’t remember. I’m sure I hit one or two.” I feel his gaze on my profile, his hands stopping briefly to again call bullshit. It’s one of the things I both loved and hated about him. He was maddeningly blunt and honest until things got personal.

“I can give the list back to you if you need it.”

Wait...he *kept it*?

It must have been one of the things I left behind at his house the day we broke up.

“Naw, I’m good. I’ve had a lot of good birthdays, so...” I rinse my hands. “I’ve got a surprise for my parents, and since everyone is gathered in the living room, it’s kind of the perfect time. Do you mind if I go get it ready?”

“Go ahead.” He nods, pushing his sleeves further up, revealing insanely muscular forearms before adding the last of the plates into the sink full of suds. As he starts to scrub, a lock of his thick blond hair comes loose and crests over his forehead, skirting just below his brow. Instantly, an image of him hovering above me shutters in.

Slowly, so slowly, he pushes into me, his eyes fluttering closed as he whispers into my parted lips. “Feels...so good, baby, so good...” he whispers hoarsely, desire and emotion lacing his tone. “Whitney,” he lifts to stare down at me as my eyes sting at the raw vulnerability in his gaze. “Jesus Christ, you’re so fucking perfect. Nothing has ever felt so perfect.” Just as slowly, he pulls back and thrusts in again, and we both shudder at the feel. Swiveling his hips to burrow deeper, his chest flexes as I lock my ankles around him, pulling him further into me. With a harsh exhale, he drops his chin at the feel of the deep connection, hair falling across his forehead and obstructing my view of his eyes.

Eager not to miss a second of the unguarded affection in his gaze, I thread my fingers through it, combing it away before lifting to slide my tongue between his parted lips. He opens for me, his tongue plunging in time with his thrusts as I start to come apart beneath him.

The thud of a plate in the sink jars me, and I realize Eli dropped it and is now facing me, leaning into my touch...because I touched him.

I'm *still* touching him.

WHAT. IN. THE. FUCK?

Jerking my hand back, I slide my wayward palm down my thigh.

“Uh...what the hell?” I giggle exaggeratedly. “That was... *weird.*”

Sweet Jesus. It's not like I can claim 'old habits' because *who in the hell* does that?

No one.

I just caressed my ex while remembering him making love to me. How did we go from small talk about decorations and a birthday bucket list to *this* in the span of mere minutes?

“We never could last long in a room together.”

If he hadn't spoken those words to me today and looked at me in the shop with his voodoo icicle eyes, I wouldn't be anywhere near that type of memory.

“Whitney,” he breathes out softly, his eyes trying to catch mine as I keep them averted.

“I'm going to go get that ready.” Neck on fire, I turn and make a beeline for my laptop. “Thanks for the help with the dishes.”

“Fuck,” I hear exhaled harshly behind me as I haul ass toward the stairs.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Towelings off my hands, I peek into the living room. Ruby and Allen sit in recliners facing the massive TV mounted above the fireplace as Whitney types a mile a minute on her laptop, sitting next to them, solo in the loveseat. Everyone else is scattered around in the spacious seating throughout, Conner and Wyatt already sleeping upstairs, down for the night.

For the first time since I got to the cabin, I feel like the imposer I am.

“Hey handsome, what are you doing just standing there?” Ruby asks me, her smile warm and inviting. “I don’t know what my kid is up to, but you’re stuck in limbo with the rest of us until we find out. Take a seat.”

“I’ve got room here, Eli,” Gracie pipes, scooting from the edge of the couch toward Thatch, who drapes an arm around her, Serena on his other side as Peyton lays milk drunk on his chest.

“What is this, Sweet Pea?” Allen asks Whitney. “Need me to get Alexa in on it?”

Alexa – I’m sorry, I’m having trouble understanding right now.

“Dad, seriously, give it a rest,” Brenden grunts in irritation.

“Don’t talk about my other wife that way,” Allen chides.

“Speaking of wives, almost done,” Whitney says, typing a mile a minute, a knowing smirk curving her lips. “Kill the lights, would you, Eli?”

“Sure.” After clicking off the lights, I take a seat at the edge of the couch just as Whitney turns toward her parents. “We know your anniversary isn’t for a few weeks, but we wanted to do this while we are all together.”

“Which anniversary?” I ask.

“40th,” Allen boasts proudly.

“Oh, no,” Ruby says, her eyes lighting with excitement. “What have you done now, Sweet Pea?”

“Thank God Dad gave me the password, or we’d be sitting here all night.”

“Which isn’t fair,” Gracie whines.

“I made one exception. And she had to guess it.”

Allen turns to Whitney with a stern warning look. “And she won’t be sharing it.”

“Nope. Sending,” Whitney says as she picks up her phone and mirrors it to broadcast on the large flatscreen, opening an email she sent herself with a link. Within seconds, a song, old but familiar, begins to play as the wording on the screen slowly appears—her parents’ names and their wedding date. Whitney glances at her parents excitedly as both their mouths drop when a slideshow begins.

“What song is this?” Gracie asks.

“Shh, Gracie,” Serena scolds. “Just watch.”

“Just asking,” Gracie grumbles.

“It Might Be You by Stephen Bishop,” Ruby replies, not taking her eyes off the screen. “Our song,” Ruby adds softly, her voice shaking with emotion. The whole of the living room quiets as we all get lost in the story unfolding before us. It starts with individual shots of a young Ruby and Allen before rolling onto the start of their relationship, a candid picture of them holding fishing poles in a mountain stream. Another of them cozied up by a campfire in lip lock. It’s accompanied by a few clips of old

videos, all of it flowing perfectly to the music. Their wedding photos pop up next.

Entranced, I watch the start of forty years of memories play out, including the births of Serena, Brenden, and Whitney. We all sit hypnotized, the music filtering throughout the room, making it impossible not to be affected. My chest tightens unexpectedly as I watch a short clip of Whitney taking her first steps.

Various stages of their collective lives follow—camping trips, family vacations, milestone after milestone. Laying witness to it firsthand is so incredibly different from hearing her stories. A warmth spreads inside my chest as I watch Whitney hand a present to her father on Christmas Day, and a much younger Allen pulls her into his lap and nuzzles her. Swallowing, I feel Whitney’s eyes on me briefly as the music changes. Air Supply’s “Lost in Love” rings out next, and my gaze flits to Ruby and Allen, who sit completely taken aback as they watch snapshots of their lives fill the screen replaying four decades of successful marriage. Looking back at Whitney, I see her eyes dart back to me, and I grin before I mouth a “wow.” Her reply is a beaming smile as her gaze drifts over to her parents while Serena sniffs to the right of me. I can feel the emotions of every person in the room and catch movement in my peripheral. Brenden takes Erin’s hand, pulling her into his lap as she lovingly grips it between her own hands. It’s clear they have similar aspirations for their own marriage. They want this.

Serena wants this.

Whitney wanted this.

With examples like Ruby and Allen, who the hell wouldn’t?

Oddly, envy isn’t even in the lineup of emotions running through me. If anything, I feel nothing but happy for them all. Happy that they were fortunate enough to have the gift of each other and that it’s endured all this time. As the years pass, I sit back and soak it all in and can’t help my chuckle when a prom picture of Whitney appears as she stands awkwardly next to her date.

“Jesus, that dress,” Serena says with a giggle, just as a picture of Serena with a bad haircut pops up. “Had to include that one, didn’t you, sis?”

“We’re all in this together,” Whitney says definitively, and I know she believes it. She has every reason to. Thatch and Serena’s wedding follows. Just after, Brenden and Erin’s wedding plays out, prefacing pictures of the births of each grandchild. It’s then I look over to Whitney, the only Collins girl unspoken for. Glancing around, I realize all individual families are bundled together as Whitney sits alone, seemingly undeterred in her position as both maestro and memory keeper. Though I feel every bit of the disappointment for her, all I see in her expression is devotion, and it’s like a battering ram to the chest.

She deserves the same success story. She deserves the life she wanted, the life she romanticized and always has.

I wanted it for her as much as she wanted it for herself.

The question is, why didn’t she have it?

As the video comes to an end, a picture appears of two elderly people huddled together in the cabin’s back yard. Easily, I identify them as Grandpa Joe and Grammie P, short for Penelope. I feel the crushing weight of their loss in those surrounding me before their images slowly fade away, and GRAVITY appears in block letters on the screen. The video cuts to black as sniffs sound throughout the room. The silence broken when Ruby speaks up.

“Have *one more*, Son,” Ruby says, slowly turning to Brenden. “I dare you, have *one more*.” No doubt she’s referring to her earlier statement about Whitney, and I feel the maternal love flowing from her as Ruby’s pride and tear-filled eyes drift to her. “What a blessing you are, beautiful girl.” Ruby stands just as Whitney gets to her feet. The two embrace for long moments, both sniffing and smiling.

“That was incredible,” Ruby whispers. “Thank you.”

“Happy Anniversary,” Whitney says softly as Allen interrupts their hug to give her a bear hug of his own, his eyes red. “You got us good, Sweet Pea.”

“Glad you liked it, Daddy. I already uploaded it to your Drive.”

“Overachiever,” Brenden growls from his chair as Erin rolls her eyes, brushing a tear away. “No, seriously, you did good, sis,”

Brenden says, rare emotion in his own eyes. “That was so awesome.”

“Can’t take all the credit,” Whitney tells her parents. “Serena helped me sort the pictures and videos for *months*. I guess Brenden chipped in a little too.”

“Thanks, sis, that bus tire felt great.”

“God, you didn’t tell me it would be that cool,” Serena stands, wiping her eyes free of tears. “You did so good, Whit.” Serena pulls Whitney into a hug, and they separate, smiling.

“I only had like six pictures in there,” Gracie pipes in, disgruntled, which breaks up the raw sentiment and has us all laughing.

“Oh, the vanity,” Thatch says, grabbing Gracie and knuckling the top of her head while managing to keep Peyton snoozing on his chest. “Don’t worry, Gracie, I’m sure you’ll star in the next one, in your own ugly prom dress,” Thatch assures.

“My dress *won’t* be ugly. Mommy won’t let it be ugly.”

“Damn straight,” Serena agrees as Thatch stands. “We’re off to bed.”

“Us too,” Erin says, standing and holding out her hand to Brenden, who does the same.

“I’m taking my bride to bed as well,” Allen proclaims.

“TMI, Dad,” Brenden interjects as he follows Erin upstairs.

Everyone says their collective goodnights, and once vacated, Whitney begins to straighten the living room. I stand, gathering Peyton and Wyatt’s scattered toys from the floor and putting them in their designated plastic bin.

“That was fucking awesome,” I tell Whitney, grabbing the opposite end of a large throw as she starts to fold it.

“Thanks.”

“Really, Whitney, it was...” I shake my head, “you truly do have an incredible family and every right to be proud of it.”

She bites her lip, her face solely lit by the light of the Christmas tree and the dying fire.

I frown. “What?”

“I didn’t know if it would bother you.” The fact that she was concerned about my reaction only further reminds me that I still know her.

“It’s been a long time. I’m not as sensitive about it. But thank you for—”

“Was it your parents?”

I draw my brows. “Was what my parents?”

“Was that why you were having such a hard time when we...”

“Were together?” I nod. “A lot of it was, yes.”

She nods, claiming the blanket from me and folding it over the side of the couch. She turns and pauses. “Sometimes when I think about you—” she cuts herself off, “well when I think about how hard it must have been for you to have lost them so suddenly like you did, I think I might not have realized the true extent of just how much you were going through. It had only been two years, and maybe, maybe I stupidly thought that was enough time to grieve—”

“You were perfect,” I say vehemently, sliding my hands in my pockets. “So fucking perfect, Whitney. You did absolutely *nothing* wrong.”

“I pushed you to go out and do things you weren’t—”

“I needed those pushes,” I assure her, fighting the inclination to get closer.

“We fought about it.”

“I know, but I assure you I did. I just didn’t know it at the time.”

She nods once, and I decide to drop another truth bomb.

“In fact, I can say with certainty that you were exactly what I needed at a time when I had no idea what I needed looked like. I know that now. I hope you didn’t think that was the reason—”

“I did.”

Guilt surfaces, and I swallow. “I’m sorry for that.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s all good. *We’re good*. Night.”

“Goodnight.”

Fingers itching at my sides, I resist the dire urge to stop her, to lay it all out, but her tone indicates that door is no longer open—at least for tonight—so I let her walk away, up the stairs and out of sight.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Hearing faint grunts and easily identifying the culprit, I open the attic door to the second floor to catch Peyton, clad in a onesie, struggling to climb over the reinforced barricade. Moving to intercept, he slips over and lands in a terrifying thud on the other side of the gate with a giggle before popping up in one piece. Letting out a whoosh of relieved breath and bristling with indecision to grab him for his own safety, he eases my worry slightly when he grips the heavily carpeted stair railing and slowly begins his descent, taking one step at a time. “Lieeeeee,” Peyton beckons his new love interest as he reaches the bottom step. I stay a good bit behind before following him down.

“I’ve been waiting for you, little guy,” I hear Eli respond from somewhere in the living room. Unable to resist, I peek around the corner and see Eli is dressed from head to boot, looking catalog perfect in light-washed jeans, a solid white thermal, and a pinstriped beanie. I can’t help the zing in my chest when I spot the sippy cup waiting in his hand. Giggling, Peyton sprints toward Eli’s open arms as he bends and scoops him into his hold.

“Two squeezes,” Eli murmurs to his temple before walking Peyton over to the massive windows as the early morning sun fills the room. “Look, buddy, it snowed again. Grammy is going to be so happy.”

“So happy,” Peyton concurs in a rare adult voice, his arm wrapped around Eli’s neck, his milk tucked into the crook of his arm as they both stare out at the blanket of fresh snow covering the grounds.

“Want to go outside for a little bit? Make a snowman?”

“Mep. Pease, pease.”

“All right. Drink your milk. I’ll grab your boots and jacket.” Eli gathers the coat and baby boots from the ottoman and bundles Peyton up between sips of milk before the two head out onto the porch through the den. Back upstairs, from my attic room, I watch them between the blinds witnessing up close a living dream I had far too many moons ago. It’s the daydreams that got me in trouble. Some he brought to life, some he obliterated.

Though he wasn’t verbal with his feelings, it was through acts of perceptive kindness that he showed me he cared. He knew the way I took my coffee, studied me when I was nervous about a class, covered me with a blanket when I drifted off on his couch, dried my body with tender caresses when we got out of the shower, rubbed my feet after a long run as we watched TV. Simple things that showed he was paying attention to my needs, all the while denying my want for a true connection with him.

He made love to me, often, and in that time, I had no doubt that feelings existed, even if he never spoke the words. As far as boyfriends went, he was both the best and worst of them. But it was the fact that ninety-five percent of the time he made me happy that I settled for less than I deserved.

I justified the shitty five percent by telling myself that it was a typical relationship—but it wasn’t. That ninety-five percent was blissful, while that five percent hurt like hell. The reason or cause for it lingered for years. It haunted me. I never could pinpoint what set him off, even after I had distance and needed perspective.

But the thing that haunted me most—and has always haunted me since—was the question...did he *ever* love me? Or was I just a temporary distraction?

The way we broke up posed those questions, which to this day remain unanswered. When I finally was able to box Eli away, I realized I’d never get those answers. Oddly enough, it seems he

came here to deliver them, and I'm not sure I want them anymore.

Heart aching with memory, I can't help my smile when I hear Peyton's giggles ring out below. Eli's already won my family over in the short time he's been here. He's still a charmer and definitely hasn't lost his touch in that respect. It's only a matter of time before he conquers Serena, and then I'll be left to fend for myself. Even so, I have to be careful.

Forcing myself away from the sight of them, I resume my place in bed, determined to stand my ground despite my slip up last night. Even if he's changed, no one can change *that* drastically. After all, he's still a bachelor without a single tie binding him to anything or anyone, no doubt by choice. Even as the thought starts to cement my resolve in keeping him at a safe distance, Peyton and Eli's mixed voices sound from below my window. Tuning in with a smile on my face, I somehow drift back to sleep.



Pound. Pound. Pound.

“Wake up, Auntie Whit!” Gracie calls from outside my door. “It snowed!”

“It snows here, Gracie,” I groan.

“No, I mean, it really snowed! A lot!!”

A dramatic pause.

“OH CRAP, *GRAMPS!*” Gracie roars over the peekaboo on the second floor. “Can we still go to Moonshine Mountain?!”

Groaning due to her shrieking, I pull a pillow over my head.

“Whit!” Peyton barks from the other side of the door. “Ti Whit! comere! Mere!”

The sound of the door handle turning left and right has me thankful for the lock as I toss my pillow and stare up at the ceiling.

“Lord, I love them. I do, but please, if you are planning to bless me with more patience at some point in my life, let it be *today*.”

Bladder screaming, I rise and crack my neck, my lower back smarting as I massage it before opening the door. Laughter spills from my lips as I see the pile-up of nieces and nephews at my threshold. Conner fidgets nervously next to the ringleader, Gracie, unsure of what she’s doing there.

“Guys, I don’t know why you’re stalking me. There’s no party up here.”

“Grammy told us to wake you up before you miss breakfast. We were supposed to go tubing today, and I think it snowed too much!”

“Gracie, please stop yelling. I’m standing right here.”

“Up!” Peyton orders, holding his hands up.

“I have to pee-pee.”

Peyton keeps his hands up. “I go.”

“No, you not go,” I run my hand over his wayward cowlick. “Give me ten minutes, guys, and I’ll be down.”

“Okay,” Gracie concedes quickly as I pull Conner into my arms for a reassuring hug.

“Doing okay, baby girl?” Conner nods and hugs me back before turning and following Gracie and Peyton down the stairs. Fifteen minutes later, I shuffle into the dining room and instantly feel all eyes on me, especially the intense shade of powder blue.

“You look beautiful today, Sweet Pea,” Mom speaks up as I take my seat. “That a new outfit?”

I glance down at my new jogging suit. “I picked it up while we were shopping yesterday.”

“Pink has always been your color,” my mother admonishes as a blush threatens.

Ridiculous. What thirty-eight-year-old woman blushes?

Get a fucking grip, Whitney.

I shake some oat squares into my waiting bowl as the almond milk is passed over the table. Lifting my eyes to Eli, I take his

offering with a soft “Good Morning. Thank you.”

“Morning, welcome,” he says just as softly. The look he brands me with is anything but breakfast cordial. Heat again threatens to bloom in my cheeks as I turn to gaze outside and scope the amount of snowfall.

“Wow, it really did come down last night.”

“Isn’t it amazing?” Mom beams taking a seat at the table. “A blessing.”

The front door opens and Thatch steps inside the house, kicking thick snow off his boots on the mat, his expression bleak as Gracie looks on at him expectantly.

“Sorry, baby. It dumped too much to dig the cars out and get us safely down the driveway.”

“Awesome,” my mother says with a smile. “Let’s hope we get more.”

“No, Grammy, then we won’t be able to go tubing!” Gracie appeals to Thatch as he joins us at the table. “Can you try harder, Daddy?”

“We’re getting low on rock salt already, and I have a feeling most of the town is shut down until they plow. It’s going to take them a day to get out here, Gracie. The main road is too dangerous to try and reach. I’m afraid none of us are getting out today.”

“NOOOOO!!!” Gracie shouts.

“I’ve got an idea,” Eli speaks up.

Thatch’s expression lights with hope. “Yeah?”

“Might work,” Eli says.

“Well, I’m all ears,” Thatch replies, pouring cereal.

Dad enters the dining room to take his seat, his mouth parted for a greeting just as Mom stands and blocks him. “If you don’t have your hearing aids in, turn your ass around *right now* and put them in.”

Dad’s eyes widen as Mom seems to tower above him from a foot below. If he didn’t hear, he definitely read the threat in her

posture. Without so much as a word, Dad turns and stomps back toward their bedroom as Brenden chuckles. “Get em’, Mom.”

“It’s like he has to give himself a pep talk or something for a few hours before he’ll finally put them in. Ridiculous.” Mom turns to Brenden. “And don’t be so smug, son. One day, father time may take away some of the basics from *you*.”

“Winky first,” Erin quips as Serena and I drop our jaws in surprise. “It’s his worst fear,” she adds with a giggle.

Serena recovers first. “*Good one, sis.*” They fist bump as Brenden shoots Erin the stink eye.

“So, what are you thinking, Eli?” Thatch asks around a mouthful of cereal.

Eli turns to my mother. “Ruby, mind if I raid the kitchen?”

She replies with an easy smile. “All yours, handsome.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



“AHHHHHHHHhhhhhh hahahahahah!” Gracie squeals as she shoots down the steep slope of the driveway on one of Ruby’s supersized roasting pans which we customized with Allen’s power tools, drilling holes through the sides and weaving rope through for a handle.

“Fucking killer idea, man,” Thatch says, clapping his hand on my shoulder. We spent the majority of the morning situating the cars for space before shoveling snow into thick piles edging the driveway, and building a bank at the bottom of it for soft landings. A landing that Brenden maintains at the bottom of the steep bank as he relinquishes his shovel briefly to help Gracie to her feet. She dusts off before she starts her trek back up, makeshift sled in hand, the radiant smile on her face making the intensive labor worth every minute. With Thatch’s innovation, we even managed to do a two-lane, the second being a lot riskier. Thatch caught air on it earlier—which I found hilarious.

“I go,” Peyton wiggles in Thatch’s grip. “Me go now, Da da!”

“We just had a turn, bud,” Thatch tells him as Conner gears up for another round. Serena and Whitney have taken turns bringing out mugs of hot chocolate and coffee, keeping the kids sugared up and us caffeinated. The last delivery made by Whitney, who’s kept my gaze zeroed in on her since she entered

the dining room looking hot as fuck in a pale pink tracksuit, her hair in twin braids, lips thoroughly glossed. I haven't been able to look away from her since she sauntered in this morning as if she didn't look fucking edible.

Tempting and taunting, much like she did when we first started dating.

Whitney glides off the elevator in a form-fitting sweater dress and leggings, balloon animal in hand, her face painted with a cluster of snowflakes and footprints, and the Tar Heels logo. Her eyes alight as she looks over at me, our hands firmly clasped. I brush my thumb over the back of her hand as she guides me toward her apartment door. Her enthusiasm just as contagious as she chatters on about what? I have no idea at this point. Though I credit myself for being an attentive listener, I've spent most of tonight memorizing her as she dragged me around the winter carnival and ordered me to do her bidding. I spent a small fortune on gluttonous snacks, but her easily-given smiles were worth every penny. She was more in her skin tonight than I've ever seen her, comfortable, a lot less confrontational.

It's when she reaches her front door that I decide I can't wait another second. I pin her to it, and she gasps against the door as I mold my mouth to her neck, kissing a trail up to her chin and lingering there.

"Eli," her moan reverberates as she reaches behind her, sliding her hand around the back of my head, pulling me in closer. I lick the small amount of caramel away from her lip that's been taunting me since she finished her apple just before entering her apartment building.

"Eli," she rasps as she looks at me with pleading eyes, "please don't play—"

"I couldn't if I wanted to, Bee," I murmur, crushing her mouth with mine as she gasps against my lips, opening intuitively. Our tongues start to dance and then tangle as we lock together, our mouths fusing naturally, so naturally, it causes a surreal sort of shift in my chest.

It's then I struggle to keep the waiting beast in me leashed, who's grown hungrier on every one of our six dates. It's also this very reason right here I've been hesitant to get intimate with her.

Not because I don't like her incessant chatter, or her quirks, or her endless badgering, or her cute jabs, or the fact that she's always ten minutes late for everything. It's the raw feeling in my chest now that caused me to wait, selfishly hoping that some of those quirks would turn me off to the point I would stop my pursuit. If I at all found a flaw in any of it, I might have had a chance of walking away.

With just one taste of her, I know I'm fucked. It was this very feeling that had me chasing her, and it's the same feeling that's rocking me to my core now.

Surprised by just how powerful the kiss feels, I pull away and stare down at her to see her eyes are half-mast, her lips beautifully swollen, an image I will never be able to erase.

I'm so fucked.

"Eli," she whispers breathlessly, as though she's seeing me in the same light. Intent on more, greedy as fuck for it, I brace myself for impact, intent on kissing her until my legs or lips or both give out. I'm saved by the elevator when it dings, and the doors start to open.

"Come inside," she rasps softly, as temptation tents my jeans, and we get lingering looks from her neighbors as they pass us before entering their apartment.

"Next time."

Instead of arguing with me or tempting me further, she leans back against the door and beams up at me. "I knew you wanted to kiss me."

"How did I fair?"

"Promise not to let your head explode if I'm honest?"

"Absolutely not."

We share a smile. "Then maybe I'll keep it to myself."

"I'll coax it out of you," I murmur, diving in for another taste and pulling away just before the lust threatens what brain cells I have remaining.

"I look forward to it," she whispers. "Good night, Eli."

"Good night, Whitney."

“I’d have to be a corpse to miss what’s going on,” Thatch says, interrupting my memory and catching me eyeing the closed front door. “Are you planning on doing something about that?”

I glance toward Brenden—who stands at the end of the driveway—shoveling snow onto the pile to reinforce our bank, his warning about my involvement with Whitney on the forefront.

“It’s complicated.”

“Just a heads up, she’s a Collins girl, so it’s *always* going to be complicated.” I feel the insinuation in his tone. “Trust me, that’s not a hurdle any man can clear easily.” He shakes his head as Peyton wiggles in his hold. “Don’t get me wrong. It’s worth it. There’s a lot to be said for the Collins women, but they expect a lot.”

“I’m familiar. She was an utter pain in the ass when we dated.”

“But the reward is how much they give.” Thatch sighs.

“I’m very aware of that too.”

“Not that I’m in any position to preach at the moment. Nearly twenty years together, and I’m just as clueless as I was day one.”

“You’ve been in this family a long time. I wouldn’t dismiss that.”

“I’m not, trust me. I can say I’ve earned my seat at the table. But like I said, I’d have to be a dead man not to see.” He glances over at me. “And it’s not one-sided.”

“She’s made it clear she wants me nowhere *near her table*.”

“You’re too smart to truly believe that. I’ve witnessed a lot over the years. She’s brought a few decent guys home, but none of them stuck. And none of them were on the receiving end of the looks she’s been giving you, if that helps.”

“It does. Thanks, man.”

“Thing about Whitney,” he adds, a slight edge of warning in his voice, “she’s not just my sister-in-law. She’s one of the people I’m closest to, so if you can’t back the looks you’re giving her up —”

“Message received,” I say.

“Da, down. I go! I go now,” Peyton commands.

“Just a second, son.”

“I go now, Da da!”

“How about I just toss you!” Thatch begins to play-throw Peyton into the snowbank, pulling him back safely at the last minute as Peyton squeals in delight. Thatch nuzzles him, his face alight with adoration as Peyton belts out more demands.

“I go, Da da!”

“You’re exhausting, son.”

“You sasting!” Peyton counters, and we both chuckle.

The front door closes, grabbing our attention as Whitney descends the steps with Serena on her heels as she calls out to Gracie and Conner. “Kids, lunch!”

Conner immediately discards her cookie sheet into the small pile we have sitting next to us and heads upstairs and into the house.

“One more turn, Mommy!” Gracie screams, securing herself into the pan for another go.

“After lunch. Get in there. Grammy made soup, and it’s getting cold.”

“Ewww,” Gracie calls back over her shoulder. “I don’t like soup.”

“You will eat it, and you will thank her for it,” Thatch scolds.

“Fine. One more go,” Gracie fires back, opening negotiations.

“*Now*, young lady,” Thatch barks. Outraged, Gracie stands and tosses the pan on the driveway.

“Pick it up, right *now*,” Serena orders.

“Gah, I was having so much fun!” Gracie whines, turning and picking up the pan before walking it up and handing it to me.

“We’ll be here when you get back,” I assure her.

Gracie surprises me with a hug. “Thank you, *Eli*.” I can only imagine the hairy eye she’s giving her parents.

“Welcome,” I say, patting her back.

“Gracie,” Thatch says, “now, go eat.”

“Yessir,” she sasses, making her way up the steps.

“Ti Whit, do it!” Peyton holds out his arms and grunts as she approaches.

“I’m going to clean out the garage,” Serena says, turning to her husband. “Thatch?”

“I’m good, babe.”

Serena’s expression falls. “Really?”

Whitney grabs Peyton from Thatch. “I’ve got him, Thatch. Go on. Take a time out with the wife.”

“You two need help?” I offer, looking between them.

“Uh, no, man,” Thatch says with a chuckle. Confused, my gaze follows them as they disappear into the partially open garage before closing the door. I glance over at Whitney. “Are they...you know?” I raise my brows.

“No,” Whitney replies with wide eyes. “We try our best not to make an announcement to the family before fornicating in broad daylight feet away from each other, Eli.”

“Then what am I missing?”

Whitney flashes a rueful grin. “Cleaning out the garage is code for adult-only activities. Activities *you* aren’t into.”

“Ah.”

Erin appears on the porch with two thermoses in hand, eyeing Brenden, who is distractedly repacking snow at the end of the driveway. Erin grins, handing one of the thermoses to me. “Ruby said you boys would probably keep busy out here and wanted you to get some lunch.”

“Thank you and thank her for me,” I say, biting off one of my gloves by the finger and warming my hand around the thermos as Whitney makes her way down the steps with Peyton while he jabbars orders at her.

“Maybe it’s because you never come out here,” Erin and I hear Serena snap to Thatch behind the closed garage door.

“Serena, I really don’t need this shit today. I was having a good time.” Thatch fires back as Erin and I glance at each other, both of us growing uncomfortable hearing the heated exchange. Just after, the garage door starts to open, and we both look over to see Thatch’s lower half coming into view.

“We aren’t done talking.” Serena appears behind him, gripping his arm before the two begin to bicker heatedly, voices low but still within earshot. Clearing my throat, I take a hearty sip of the soup as Erin increasingly grows wide-eyed at Thatch and Serena’s bickering.

“Good stuff,” I mutter in a shitty attempt to make conversation.

“Isn’t it?” Erin says, shooting a fearful glance past my shoulder towards Serena and Thatch.

It’s Brenden’s fearful shout from the bottom of the driveway that has me turning back to see Whitney and Peyton sitting on the roasting lid.

“I’ve got this, bro. Jeesh,” Whitney assures him as Brenden flails his arms, heading up the steep driveway just as Peyton finishes a countdown.

“Two, FWEE!”

It’s when I see the direction they’re facing that panic seizes my chest, my own warning coming too late.

“Whitney, no!”

I drop my thermos as they take off like a shot, going down the adults-only lane.

“Oh, my God!” Erin exclaims a second behind my shout as Whitney and Peyton fire off with the speed of a bobsled from the jump before ping-ponging down the side of the bank and heading straight into an inch’s thick patch of ice that sends them into a series of three-sixty turns. Sliding sideways, they manage to stay in the pan before careening out of control down the steep hill. Screams from all sides of me sound as Thatch and Serena race out of the garage, and I charge in front of them, the pounding in my chest coming a close second to my frantic footfalls.

The next few seconds play out in slow motion as I haul ass down the driveway doing my best not to wipe out as they rocket

toward uncharted territory, a tidal wave of snow flying up from all sides of them. Heart seizing, I manage to make it halfway down the hill before they go airborne off the bank and manage an Olympic hangtime before crash landing into the mulch and rock-covered side street near a cluster of trees.

Heart seizing, I catch up with Brenden as we skid down the remainder of the bank and clear a good amount, only to stop when we see Peyton's flailing legs. I arrive first, skidding to a halt as hysterical laughter pours from the baby while he sits suspended in the air by Whitney's iron hold, her arms braced above her head as if she's presenting him to us while the rest of her is buried in snow. Peyton roars with laughter as Thatch reaches us and snatches Peyton from Whitney's hold while I frantically start to dig her out. Managing to uncover her, I only relax when I see her doe eyes are wide open, her face ashen. She blinks once, twice.

"Peyton?" She whispers in a panic.

Thatch looks Peyton over as Peyton giggles. "Gain, gain, Da da!"

Brenden hovers near us, completely still as Whitney's chest rises and falls, her eyes searching as her ears register Peyton's voice. She moves to sit, and I stop her.

"Don't!" I bark as I push the rest of the snow covering her away to see a little blood trickling from her temple. "Tell me what hurts."

"Peyton!" She cries frantically as if snapping out of a stupor.

"He's okay, Whit," Thatch assures her checking him over with wide eyes, "h-he's fine."

Whitney's eyes water. "He's okay?"

"Look at me," I demand as maternal fear threatens to consume her.

"And don't move, damnit!" I bark. She stills, her brown eyes flying to mine as I begin to examine her from head to foot while she lays perfectly still, following my movement.

Brenden finally speaks up, his face purpling with the urge to laugh. "Sis, you okay? I really need you to be because once I start laughing, I'm afraid I'll never stop, *ever* a-fucking-gain."

“Tell me where it hurts,” I say hoarsely, hearing the fear in my voice as I eye the blood at her temple.

“You got a pen?” Whitney croaks, her joke bursting Brenden’s dam as laughter erupts from inside of him like an explosion. I glare over at him as he covers his mouth to try and stifle it, which does absolutely nothing to help.

Intent I search every inch of her and am slightly satisfied when I find minimal damage to the touch. “I don’t think anything’s broken, but you’re a little bloody.”

“That’s all? Shit, I earned *way more* than that,” she jests, but it’s clear she’s in pain.

“It’s not funny,” I scold, the panic disbursing only enough for me to speak without a shake in my voice. “Okay, I’m going to lift you to sit. *Easy.*”

I manage to get her sitting and give her a second to adjust.

“Good?”

“Yeah. I can stand. Nothing’s broken but my spirit.”

“Nah,” I manage a grin for her. “Impossible.”

I lift her to stand and begin brushing snow from her as she falters a little and winces.

“And my ass. I’m positive that’s broken.”

“Happy to check that as well,” I give her a wink as we start a slow trek up the hill. Brenden howling at our backs uncontrollably. Whitney growls over her shoulder at her brother.

“Shut up, asshat. Jesus, you are a terrible human being.”

Happy to hear her sass but too concerned I might have missed something vital—I pull her against me. “Ignore him. Let’s get you to the house.”

Whitney moves like a newborn fawn on shaky legs as I slowly guide her back up the driveway. She slips a few times as Brenden continues to howl from the bottom of the hill.

“I hate you!” Whitney calls over her shoulder as the entirety of the family stands in wait for us on the porch, concern etched on their faces.

“You purple your ass too, Sweet Pea?” Allen asks as they all back up to make room for us.

“Gramps, that’s a bad word,” Gracie scolds.

“Busted it bad, Daddy,” Whitney manages in a grimace.

“Matching asses, that’s a daddy’s girl,” Allen chuckles.

Heart still rioting, I scoop Whitney into my arms at the foot of the stairs and carry her up, sidestepping the onlookers to rush her into the house.

“I can walk,” Whitney grits out, embarrassment in her tone as she glances around at her family.

“Well, you aren’t,” I snap, “So, get over it.”

“Thanks, handsome,” Ruby says as she opens the door for us, and I carry her in, my panic subsiding a little more as I walk her down the hall into the downstairs bathroom. Locking the door, I set her on her feet and gently inspect the cut on the side of her head.

“Do you remember hitting your head?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. It’s not pounding.”

“Keep talking to me,” I order as I guide her to sit on the toilet seat and start undressing her.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure you’re okay. You’re in shock right now, and the pain might not fully be registering yet.”

“Not shocked enough to get naked.”

“You can leave on your bra and panties.”

“I think *not*, sir.”

“Do not fucking argue with me right now,” I growl.

She has the good sense to keep quiet as I get her boots and socks off before standing her up and untying the drawstring on her pants.

I can do it, but it’s not necessary.”

“I just watched you fly off the side of a fucking mountain cliff and crash land. I’ll decide what’s necessary.” Pulling her

pants down, I inspect her legs, front and back, before removing her jacket and the three layers of shirts she has on beneath.

“Shit, your hip is bruising up good, so is your back.” I cover every inch of her and pause at her clavicle, which seems to have taken the brunt of it. I apply some pressure, and she jerks away and whimpers.

“Sorry, sorry. But I’m going to press some more, okay? Just to make sure.” I run my fingers along her collar bone and apply more pressure. “How’s this?”

“Hurts a lot, but it’s bearable.”

“Good, nothing broken.”

A knock on the door has us both turning toward it.

“I’m not decent!” Whitney shouts. “Give us a second.”

Silence on the other side has Whitney backtracking for better word choice.

“I mean, I’m decent but not fully clothed.”

“I don’t think that sounded any better,” I grin.

“We’ll be right out when we’re finished. Eli’s working me over!”

Full-blown laughter bursts from my lips, and more panic subsides as I sit her back down before pulling a washcloth from the towel rack. Wetting it with warm water, I bring it to the cut just above her ear and begin to clean it as breath escapes her in a hiss. I mimic her wince. “Shit, sorry.”

It’s when her eyes find mine, searching my face, that I pause, realizing just how close we are and how undressed she is. Silence ensues for a couple of sloppy seconds before I get my shit together as she shifts on the seat, and I keep my eyes trained on her, refusing to drop my gaze.

“What’s your pain level like?”

“I feel like I got my ass kicked, but I’ll survive.”

“Keep talking.”

“Why?”

“Because slurred speech is a sign of a concussion.”

“I don’t have a concussion.”

“Did you blackout at all?”

“It’s not a concussion.”

“Whitney, just keep talking, damnit.”

“Fine. What the hell *was that?* Everyone else went down just fine.”

“That’s because they were going down the bunny slope.”

“If there were different slopes, there should have been some indication. You know, like a sign for Easy Street or the fucking Highway to Hell.”

It wouldn’t have mattered; you took a hard right on the valley of the shadow of death.”

We grin at each other briefly.

“I want to check on Peyton.”

“Peyton is fine. You’re the one who’s bleeding.”

“I could have hurt him.”

“You didn’t.” I wipe the rest of the blood away to reveal a small cut. It’s then my pulse finally begins to even out, and breath comes easier. “Jesus, you scared the shit out of me.”

Out of nowhere, a nervous laugh bursts from her.

“How was my form?”

“Terrible.”

“And my landing?”

“You looked like a penguin sliding backward after you lost the pan, but that baby save was fucking epic.”

Chest bouncing, she begins to full-blown belly laugh as nerves, the adrenaline crash, and embarrassment take over, and it’s the fucking sweetest sound I’ve ever heard. I can’t help my grin as she explodes into another lengthy fit helping the rest of the stinging panic fall away.

“Jesus,” I shake my head from memory. “You were just as insane in college. Always leaping before looking.”

“I’m taking snow sports off my list,” she says with a grin.

“Wouldn’t be a bad idea,” I say, returning it. “But honestly, you don’t have to feel bad anymore for all the birthday bucket extreme sporting you missed out on. I’m pretty sure you just covered it all in one go.

I see goosebumps cover her chest as her laughter slows. It’s then I realize I’m cupping her face, sliding my thumb along her jaw. Instead of withdrawing my hand, I share breath with her as her eyes slide up and down my face before finally connecting with mine. Breaths mingling, we simply stare at the other as I continue to caress her with my thumb, getting lost in a place we created years ago and knowing she’s there, *with me*. I feel the break just before her eyes drop.

“Who says I was feeling bad about it?”

“I do.”

“Well, maybe I’m just a lot more cautious now. Thank you,” she says, pushing at the wrist holding the washcloth away from her. “I think I’m good.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



Feeling like I've been hit by a Mack truck, I sit in the recliner as my family takes turns waiting on me while Eli keeps me from dozing by attempting to lure me into conversation.

“Sing the UNC fight song,” he orders the second my eyes close.

“I will do no such thing,” I retort, not an ounce of fight in me as all my limbs scream in protest. Thatch enters the living room eyeing the iPad screen in Peyton's grip just as Simba is presented to the kingdom. Thatch chuckles holding out a mug full of hot tea. “Pose look familiar, Whit?”

“Har har,” I say as Eli's deep chuckle rumbles next to me. To be fair, it's the first time he's laughed.

“Thatch,” I say, eyeing Peyton, who's sitting stock-still, completely captivated by his favorite movie. “I'm so—”

Thatch shakes his head adamantly, cutting me off. “Not even a week after Gracie was born, we named you guardian if anything were to happen to us.” I take the offered tea in his hand, lips wobbling. “Two days after Peyton was born, we adjusted the will for the same reason. You would never, *ever* intentionally hurt my son or put him in harm's way. Don't even think of apologizing to me. Serena isn't even upset.”

“She’s not?”

“Nope. I’m the only one she’s pissed at today,” he sighs, bends, and kisses my forehead, and my eyes water.

“Cut it out,” he orders with a grin. “Besides, if that kid had to go flying off a mountain cliff, I can’t think of a soul better for him to do it with, and you proved that today.”

I eye Gracie, who’s flipping through the channels next to Peyton.

“I’m sorry I ruined everyone’s fun.”

“You did no such thing,” Serena says, appearing behind Thatch. “They’d been at it for hours, anyway.”

“It’s okay, Auntie Whit,” Gracie speaks up.

“Thanks, baby girl.”

Serena bends down in a whisper for me. “We’re going to go wrap if that’s okay?”

Eli bristles next to me as if agitated when I nod.

“We’ll just be down the hall in Mom and Dad’s room.”

“I’ve got it,” I tell her.

I turn to Eli as Thatch and Serena exit the living room. There’s no mistaking it or the hard set of his jaw. I can still read him.

“What?”

“You think you’re really up for watching them right now?”

“They’re just sitting here, so yes.”

He cups his chin, a move he did when he was irritated, as Gracie approaches. “Auntie Whit, can I please borrow your phone for a second?”

“Sure, baby,” I exaggerate sweetly before powering on my phone and handing it to her. She lifts it and scans my face with it, opening it up.

I glance over at Eli, who lifts a brow.

“Aunts get to spoil without consequence. It’s a perk. Don’t judge.”

“I’m not,” he replies quickly.

“You are so judging.

“You’re doing too much.”

“I’m sitting here.”

“You need to take it easy.”

“You’re the only one pestering me.”

“Keep talking,” his smile is dazzling, and it dizzies me a little as I try not to imagine being in my underthings on the toilet while his breath hit my skin. Or his eyes dropping to my lips, or the sincere terror in his face as he carried me inside the house, or his relief after, or the gentle stroke of his thumb.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” He grins again, making my heart pump faster as Erin walks in from the kitchen. I hold my hand up. “Tell Mom I’m fine. And all of you, stop fussing over me.” I turn to Eli. “You especially.”

“You defied gravity today, sis,” Erin defends, eyeing Brenden, who’s snoring in the recliner before she heads back into the kitchen.

“Exactly,” Eli chimes in.

“I’m fine,” I insist.

“You don’t have to be so tough, you know. Everyone has a right to worry.”

“Well, there’s no need.”

“No one is made of Teflon, Whitney.”

“Says the guy who went into denial every time he got sick and refused to go to the doctor.”

“I had a hot nurse.”

“A nurse you slammed the door on.”

The light in his eyes dims.

“You know,” I snark, “for someone so intent on jogging my memory, yours seems selective.”

He shrugs. “Nothing wrong with trying to remember the good.”

I lean over. “That’s because all you got was good.”

“And you don’t think you were a handful? You must be joking.”

“I was good to you.”

“Not denying it, but you could’ve stood to be taken down a peg or two.”

“Did you just Super Troopers me?”

He grins. “I love that line.”

“Well, you misquoted it. And you know I can slaughter you in movie trivia.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“I know what you’re doing.”

“Do you, now?” The wider his smile gets, the more I want to wipe it off.

“You’re starting a bickering fest to keep me in conversation.”

“It’s working,” he grins smugly.

“See, now there’s the ass I know.”

“And love?”

I snort. “Dream on pal.”

“Auntie Whit,” Gracie squeaks from the couch. “Who is Jonathan?”

“I don’t know, Gracie,” I dismiss her, narrowing my eyes on a smirking Eli. It’s clear he’s reveling in the fact that he can still push my buttons. “You’re just as arrogant as you used to be. You only know what you think you know,” I whisper vehemently, “and that’s not much.”

“Auntie Whit, what is uh-nal...analie?”

“Gracie, not now.” I lower my voice. “You may have Brenden fooled with this choir boy act, but I’m not buying it—”

“Auntie Whit, if you don’t know him, then why is he sending you pictures of his butt?”

“What?!”

Eli and I both jerk our attention to Gracie, and Eli’s expression turns to granite when he looks up at the TV screen, and my eyes follow. To my utter horror, Gracie is mirroring my incoming texts as they pop up in multiples on the monstrous screen. The entirety of the living rooms focus is now on Jonathan’s body, his muscular bare ass the focal point.

“GRACIE!” I scream, lunging to retrieve my phone as nothing but 🍆💧🍆💧🍆💧🍆💧

splashes across it.

“What does that mean?” She manages through a giggle. “The grapes and water?”

My brother rouses from a dead sleep in the recliner, spouting, “those aren’t grapes,” before bursting into hyena-like laughter as I furiously swipe my phone. A barrage of texts continues to ping in as the gaze on my profile chills to subzero.

Aside from Brenden’s cackle, silence fills the room as another picture from a different angle appears just before I’m able to cast off.

My mother, who is somehow now standing behind me, speaks up, patting my shoulder. “Well, clearly, the man works out. Good for you, Sweet Pea.”

“Gain whit! Butt gain!” Peyton roars in command as I shake my head, humiliated.

Diverting my gaze away from scrutinizing eyes, I scold my niece as Thatch stalks into the living room with Serena hot on his heels.

“Gracie!” I say, turning off my phone, “I did not give you permission to check my text messages!”

“I was just looking at the makeup pictures I took of you, and they came on the screen!”

“Do not ask for my phone again,” I scold.

“Fine,” she huffs, her expression going postal in a nanosecond as she stands and makes a declaration at the top of her lungs. “I hate Christmas!”

It's Thatch's boom that has us all jumping in our seats. "That's enough, Gracie! Go to our room this instant!"

Gracie's eyes go wide. "But Daddy, I didn't do anything!"

"You've been nothing but a nightmare since we left Nashville, and I've had enough! We've all had enough! You're making *everyone* miserable. You know better, and until you can *act better*, I don't want to see you. Go!"

Gracie's lips quiver just before she bursts into tears and sprints out of the living room, sobs erupting from her as we all turn to Thatch, confused by his tongue lashing. Thatch rarely, if ever, scolds Gracie like that, which has the whole living room going silent.

Tension grows unbearably thick as Thatch speaks up abruptly as if he's going to burst. "Jesus, I'm sorry." He glances at each of us apologetically. "I'm sorry that I can't manage to get my daughter to act like a well-behaved human being for a single day." His posture and defeated tone have my eyes watering as he stalks out of the living room toward the front door. "Please excuse me." Thatch quickly exits, closing the door softly behind him. Serena stands stunned before turning to eye me and then Peyton for permission, and I nod.

Seeing Peyton's confused expression, feeling his shaky hesitance, I snatch him from the room, grabbing his coat off the hall tree and make a beeline for the back door before stepping outside onto the back deck.

Ten minutes into playing with Peyton on the chair on the back porch, the sliding door opens, and Eli comes into view in running gear.

"Still working out twice a day?"

"Nah, I'm not as hard on myself as I used to be. But I've been distracted the last few mornings."

His dates with Peyton.

"Lie, patty take?" Peyton greets, wanting in on the conversation.

"Playing patty cake?"

“Bakers man!” Peyton exclaims, the tension from his parents minutes ago completely forgotten. If only adults could recover so quickly.

I look up to Eli, who studies me as if he’s trying to solve me.

Good luck pal, it’s been thirty-eight years, and I’m completely unsure of who’s writing this shit show.

“If you had a boyfriend, all you had to do was say so.”

“I don’t. Those texts were from my friend Sophie. She just landed her dream man and felt the need to overshare.”

“Thank Christ. Did you see the ass on that guy? No competition.”

Unable to help it, I glance up to see him smiling and can’t stop my laugh. “Credit me with having better taste. No boyfriend of mine would be taking pictures of his *own* ass or ask someone else to take them.”

“I’ll admit that was highly suspect, but you know... modern dating and twenty-first-century vanity seem to go hand in hand.”

“Call me old-fashioned, but I prefer touch to sight.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” His delivery sends a few pink parts tingling, and I ignore it, trying to keep up with Peyton’s untimely ‘patty take’ claps.

“Try to restrain yourself with my nephew in my lap, sir. And who says you’re in the running?” I give him a sideways glance. “Wasn’t that *you* I passed oh, about 100 yards back seventeen years ago?”

“I’ve got home-field advantage and an ass...er butt you can *touch*.”

“Butt!” Peyton repeats.

“Speaking of, let’s go change yours.” I stand with Peyton in my arms, shoulder to bicep with Eli. “I’m surprised that outburst didn’t send you running for the hills. This isn’t you Eli. You don’t do family or serious or domestic situations.”

“That *was me*. Now I’m a very serious domestic situational family man.”

“Uh huh. Well,” I let my eyes drop to his ass. “Don’t sell yourself short, Welch. You’ve still got a very nice butt.”

A slow grin spreads over his face.

“I’m sure plenty of women admired the view when you walked away.”

Eli’s smile disappears briefly before he shakes his head and chuckles.

“You say we’re good, but you’re intent on giving me hell to the *bitter* end, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t drag you out here.”

“Bakers Man!” the baby proclaims at the top of his lungs in the hunt for attention as my Dad walks out of the sliding glass door, his eyes zeroed on Peyton.

“There you are, my boy,” he says, claiming him from my arms.

“I was just about to change him, Daddy.”

“I’ll take care of it. We have work to do, don’t we, grandson?”

“Mep,” Peyton agrees as Dad pulls him back inside and shuts the door leaving me alone with the blue-eyed devil. Glancing back at Eli, I see his eyes light.

“Deciding on whether or not to face me without your human shield?”

“I’m not afraid of you.” I turn to face him, flirtatiously rolling my eyes over him as he finishes stretching. “I can take you.”

“Maybe if you try hard enough.” He bites his lip, turns, and continues stretching for his run.

“Careful out there. There might be a cliff waiting for you to fly off.”

“Want me to find one, Whitney?” He asks softly.

Yes.

No.

Why does he have to look so good?

When I remain silent, expectancy fills the air as he flashes me the look. *That* look, the look that tells a woman precisely what a man's thinking. In his eyes, I see us sweat-soaked and moaning. Instantaneously, the butterflies swarm me, and I flick the beautiful bastards away like the nuisance they are as Eli's lips lift in victory.

"Stop looking at me like that."

He shrugs. "Only returning the vibe."

"I'm still attracted to you. I won't deny it," I take another step forward. "Tell me something, Eli."

"Sure."

"Are you enjoying yourself here? Having a good time?"

His eyes rake over me. "At the moment, immensely."

"Good," I nod, closing the space between us and looking directly up at him. "You know, it took me a really long time to get over you."

He frowns at the sudden shift in conversation, his eyes widening at my confession.

"I cried, oh, Eli, how I fucking cried for *months*. I spent the summer torturing my parents with worry. Serena had to drag me out of bed."

His expression falters completely.

"I sobbed the first time I had sex with another man. He sent me packing. It was humiliating."

Eli sobers entirely.

"Whitney, I—"

"The one and only time my brother ever really yelled at me was when I couldn't get my shit together, and he had no idea why, but I knew."

"Jesus, I'm—"

"Yeah, you're sorry. I heard you, but the thing is, the people you're breaking bread with tonight are the people you really need to apologize to because they went through *hell* to get me back."

He repeatedly swallows as I turn and leave him there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



She obliterated me, utterly and completely obliterated me.

How in the hell can I possibly come back from that?

Feet crunching in the snow-covered field, I do my best to try to temper the sting zinging around my chest.

I cried, oh, Eli, how I fucking cried, for months.

Her confessions echo through my racing mind as I extend myself in an attempt to try and outrun them.

I sobbed the first time I had sex with another man. He sent me packing. It was humiliating.

“Fuck,” I shout, skidding to a stop, my chilled breath coming out in a fog as sweat freezes on my skin. Guilt consumes me as I admit defeat and know I can run for the next year, and I still wouldn’t be able to escape it.

I knew this would be hard. I knew she would be tough to get through to, but that? That was fucking brutal.

The worst part? I deserved it.

How can this be so painful after so long? How can this old guilt still feel so raw?

I could have told her I lost my shit when she walked away. I could have confessed how hard it was for me to even think about moving on with anyone else, but I was the cause.

Shredded, I pull my cell from my pants and send out an SOS.

She just annihilated me.

I begin a slow walk in the direction of the cabin as my phone buzzes in my hand.

Evie: What happened?

I've been flinging mini grenade truth bombs hoping to get through to her, and in turn, she dropped a fucking atom bomb on me. For a minute there, I thought I was making progress, and she pushed back harder than she has since I've been here.

Evie: That is progress.

I don't think you would see it that way if you were there.

Evie: She's fighting it.

Even if I get a chance to talk to her, I don't know if it will make a difference at all.

Evie: It will.

You seem so sure.

Evie: I am. Paul said to tell you Merry Christmas and hang in there.

Tell him I'm sorry I keep bothering you.

Evie: Don't you dare. I'm here for you. We both are.

Thank you.

Evie: Stick to the plan. You've come this far already. See it through, Eli.

I will. I am.

Evie: Proud of you.

Tucking my phone away, I clasp my hands behind my head, inhaling deeply as I search the sky for answers. Even if she's lashing out due to old hurts, I can't at all blame her. If my presence here has resurrected old feelings back, front, and center

for her, I'm dealing with the same issue—though my feelings are entirely different. While her recollections seem to be fueling her aversion—and need for space from me—mine has me wanting to get closer, so much closer.

Restarting my run toward the cabin, I sift to the memory of our last minutes together and pick up speed, her grief-stricken face and words coming in crystal clear.

“Just tell me why I'm not enough for you. Why wasn't I enough?”

The day my parents died was the worst day of my life. The day Whitney left me remains a close second. Hindsight cripples me as I run until every muscle in my body aches, the throbbing in my chest the worst of it.

Exhaustion overwhelms me as I reach the steep driveway leading up to the cabin, utterly clueless as to how to proceed. Stupidly, I hoped for some sort of redemption where there is none, and the truth I have for her isn't enough.

Ruby steps out onto the front porch just as I make it up the steps.

“Hey, handsome. You were gone for some time. I was getting worried.”

I'm able to muster a smile and pat my stomach. “No need to worry, I've got a built-in GPS, and you've been giving me a lot to burn off.” Evident concern is etched in her features as she studies me.

“Do you have any plans right now?”

“None that I can think of.”

“Great. Grab yourself a hot shower and meet me in the kitchen.”

“Yes, ma'am.”



“A dash of...what's that?” She scrutinizes the faded recipe card for her mother's chocolate icebox cake.

“Vanilla,” I tell her as she pulls a teaspoon from the drawer, measures it, and I fold it into the melted chocolate as instructed.

“Now, the water is the trickiest part. When I add it, you give it a good stir and don’t stop. Ready?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, looking her profile over. Whitney’s likeness to her is uncanny.

“She’s the spitting image of me, isn’t she?” She says, without so much as looking up while she adds the first tablespoon of water.

“She is.”

Allen stalks into the kitchen, mumbling before opening a nearby drawer, and Ruby diverts her attention to him. “Whatcha need, honey?”

“Pliers,” he says, sorting aggressively.

“You just had them.”

“I don’t remember where I put them down.”

“Obviously, but they sure aren’t going to be where you retrieved them in the first place.”

“I’m just checking.”

“You’re making a racket. Check somewhere else.” She glances over at me before rolling amused eyes upward. “Keep stirring, or it’s going to harden too much.” I nod as she turns to Allen, who’s still noisily sorting through the drawers. “You’re not going to find them in that drawer either, husband dearest. Retrace your steps.”

“Found them, Gramps!” Gracie calls from the living room as Allen cuts eyes at Ruby before stalking out of the kitchen. She watches his retreat with lighthearted annoyance. “It so pointless to bicker at this stage. Neither of us are going to change a damned thing.”

“That’s some feat, though—*forty years*.”

“It is,” she adds the last tablespoon of water as I stir. “I almost divorced him once. The kids have no idea.”

She reads the surprise in my expression before giving me a pointed look. “You are never to share this with another human

soul, Eli, do you hear me? I'm trusting you with my darkest secret."

"I swear."

"No matter what?"

"Promise."

"First, let me preface this by saying it was the marriage year to test all marriage years. I could hardly stand to be in the same room with him. We fought like cats and dogs. We had three young children to nurture and teach right from wrong. Sadly we could barely hold our tempers in front of them—me especially."

She watches me stir the chocolate as it starts to harden.

"Allen spent most of his time avoiding me by tinkering in the shed after work as I tried to wrestle the kids into being decent human beings. While I was growing impatient, he played immune, and well, let's just say there's a time for *talking* and a time for getting your point across, and sometimes the two don't go together, you know what I mean?"

"I do."

She lowers her voice above a whisper. "On this particular night, the time for talking was over for me so, in order to get my point across...I shot my husband in the ass."

Laughter bursts out of me. "You *what*?"

"I could lie and tell you I didn't mean to, but I intentionally shot my husband in the ass." She eyes the chocolate, "let's take it off the heat. And start separating those eggs, would you, handsome?"

Mouth gaping, I stare at her, "You can't leave me hanging like this."

"I wouldn't dare," she grins. "It's rare that I get to relay this story because who wants to admit something like that? Sadly, at certain times I enjoy telling it." She shrugs. "I'm no angel."

Chuckling, I crack the first egg and begin separating the yolk from the white with the shell as she leans in.

"That night, I was drained, I mean at the very end of my very short rope. The kids were screaming on account of the fact that

they were breathing. Allen was too involved with a project in his shed to help me, so I lost my shit. Fed up, I pulled out my father's ancient mini crossbow, walked out to the shed, and shot him directly in the ass."

Full-blown belly laughter takes over as she smiles, shaking her head as if she still doesn't believe it herself. When my laughter has heads turning in our direction, she shushes me.

"Of course, after, I felt terrible. I could have *really* hurt him. I was sure he was going to divorce me," her voice turns remorseful. "He was quiet the entire ride home from the ER. It was the longest ride of my life because I just knew what was coming. After I tucked the kids in, I found him waiting for me in the living room. He grabbed my hand, yanked me to his chest, looked me right in the eyes, and told me he would never leave me or let me leave him, no matter how many times I shot him in the ass. I fell back in love with him in that moment. To this day, the kids still have no idea what happened."

I widen my eyes. "Wow."

"Exactly. In a sense, he took a bullet *from* me. How could I possibly leave him after that?"

"Agreed."

"I could lie and tell you things got exponentially better, and to an extent, they did. But it was never easy, and we've never been perfect. We've fought our way through every year—some good, some bad, but neither one of us has ever walked out the front door without the intention of walking back in. It's the decision to stay that makes all the difference. I love and appreciate him more than ever now, and I don't believe any couple can get to this level of commitment without being committed for years. Know what I mean?"

"I do."

She gives me a sheepish smile. "Please don't fear for your safety here."

I grin. "I'm not."

"Good. I may be a little nuts, but I've managed to get through several more decades of marriage without another ass murder attempt." She pulls out a mixer from a drawer and hands it to me.

“My point in revealing this to you is that while *I can hold a grudge*, Allen is different. He forgives me for *everything*, and I mean *everything*. Always has. Neither of us has been the perfect spouse, but I think it’s his ability to forgive that’s kept us together all these years—and thank God for it.” She closes the egg carton and places a hand on my arm. “I have a kid capable of the same type of forgiveness. She just might need a little time to recognize the one capable of taking a shot in the ass for her.”

My own admission comes easily. “Believe it or not, I’ve suffered a lot worse.”

“I know, handsome,” she says softly, “it’s written *all over* you.”

We work side by side for a few comfortable minutes before I speak up. “Thank You, Ruby.” I know I don’t have to specify why.

She knows.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“Am I an animal?” Serena asks, the Hedbanz card strapped around her forehead. Everyone replies with a resounding “Yes.”

“Am I edible?”

“Yes,” Gracie says through a giggle.

Serena turns to Thatch. “Am I furry?”

“You can be,” Thatch answers with a grin.

“Mom,” Gracie says, “you’re not playing right. Only one question per turn.”

“I’m a damn pig, aren’t I?” Serena says dryly, and I laugh at her delivery along with everyone else. I glance over at Eli, who sits at the end of the table, a pencil card strapped to his own head. He might be sitting with us, but it’s clear his mind is elsewhere as he stares blankly into the living room, unfocused on the twinkling tree. I want so much to retract my words, but every single one spoken was the truth.

People—men in particular—probably don’t realize or care that when they give the gift of unrequited love, they also victimize the families of those they leave devastated. Maybe it’s the same way with other types of heartbreak, but that was the kind I knew.

He needed to know the cat and mouse game he started when he got here has never been a game for me—at least not with him. Since he's arrived, I've been caught in a whirlwind of mixed emotions, mostly envy and humiliation. Envy for the fact that he seems to have perfectly orchestrated and is effectively living the life I wanted while reminding me I haven't. As for the humiliation, I can feel it in every one of my aching bones. When I came at him, I felt like shit, and as petty as it may have been, I wanted him to feel just as shitty—if only for a moment. More than that, I wanted to wipe the knowing smirk off his face that reminded me at one time his charm worked, but to my detriment.

Guilt is all I feel now due to his reaction and, after, his withdrawal. He was completely quiet at dinner and insisted I take the night off from the dishes due to my spill. I didn't argue, but I watched him briefly as he scrubbed them furiously, staring down into the water, lost in thought. When I walked in with the last of the plates, having decided on an apology, he straightened his back and spoke up, refusing to look at me.

“Don't, please, Whitney, don't apologize to me if that's what you're thinking. I'm begging you.”

As if sensing my thoughts, his eyes drift over to me as I stand, back and shoulders screaming as I relinquish my headband. “I'm going to take a shower.”

I get no protest from anyone at the table before dragging myself up the stairs. Once inside the bathroom, I immerse myself under the spray, letting the heat cover my aching body. Today scared the shit out of me in more ways than one. The thought of anything happening to Peyton—hell, to anyone in my family—is my worst fear. I really don't know how parents do it. The other fear was that I was losing myself again due to my attraction to him—and not just physically—but wanting to be in the same room with him, craving his company. Things I long ago convinced myself I got over—which I did. Just not to the extent I gave myself credit for. Uncapping my shampoo, I stare at the shower tiles in a daze as I'm flooded with a memory.

Lenny Kravitz's “Five” plays on repeat throughout Eli's bedroom as I face him on my pillow.

“Your turn,” I say as he adjusts himself on the bed, cradling his head with his hand, which only accentuates the defined bulge

of his bicep beneath his T-shirt. A T-shirt I've imagined ripping from him since our torturous study session began. When he invited me over to "study," I assumed the invitation would lead to sex. In pregame mode, I buffed my skin and shaved twice, making sure I was romp ready. Wearing my skimpiest thong sans bra beneath his hoodie, I packed nothing but a toothbrush. I didn't miss his amusement when he guided me by the hand past his roommates and into his bedroom only to be met by a waiting stack of books, two of which he used last year in classes that I'm currently taking. This ensured my lack of packing was in vain.

For the first few hours as we hit the books, he did nothing but torture me, giving me heated side glances and a few lengthy kisses while forcing me to leave everything else to my imagination. After twelve dates, six of them spent waiting for a kiss, this bitch is officially in heat.

Though his hesitance to get physical feels like a genuine effort on his part to debunk his Casanova reputation, every part of me craves that connection. The anticipation is both agonizing and delicious—knowing that no amount of vocalizing my frustration will grant me any headway. I've spent hours memorizing him—his expressions, the tiny mole on his lash line, the masculine bow of his top lip, the timbre of his voice. He has no imperfections, or if he does, I'm blind to them. I'm far too smitten with him already, even if he's draining the patience out of me. A few times, I've caught myself in the midst of daydreams during lectures when I should have been taking notes. I both love and loathe the power he currently has over me due to such vivid daydreams. My only solace is that my infatuation at times seems reciprocal, even if his restraint is driving me bat shit. Part of my fascination lies in the fact that he's so hard to read.

Gazing over at him now, I trail my fingers along his pecs, and he covers my hand, flattening my palm to his chest.

"Three little things?" He asks.

"Yeah," I dip my chin studying his prominent Adam's apple, tempted to run my tongue along it. "Little things you love."

"I love running."

I yawn dramatically.

"Okay, okay, you want creative?"

“By all means, Snorli.”

“Cute.”

“I am, yes,” I agree while managing to keep a straight face.

“Very,” his eyes rake over me suggestively.

“You’re stalling.”

“I’m thinking. Are you going to let me do that, or do you want a bullshit answer?”

“I guess I can wait.”

He shakes his head. “I love waking up—”

“Waking up?” I frown.

“I wasn’t finished. I love waking up in my own bed.”

“This is an issue for you? And if so, how many other beds are we talking about?”

He rolls his eyes. “Give it a rest with that shit.”

“Fine.” I relax my shoulders, hating the gnaw in my gut as I sink into his pillow. “I can’t say it’s not comfortable. Thread count ain’t too shabby, either.”

He grins. “Smartass.”

“Next thing.”

He lifts his confiscated hoodie a mere inch above the hem of the boxer shorts he lent me to sleep in, and his eyes follow the path of his fingers along my skin.

“Okay,” he speaks up. “I’ve got one. This may seem weird, but I love biting into a pretzel and then taking a sip of Coke.”

“Seriously? You spent a full minute coming up with that?”

“You ever tried it?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Well you should, the salt reacts to the carbonated water, and it’s like a party in your mouth.”

“Fascinating.”

“Not impressed? We are talking about little things, right?”

“Right. Give me a third, Welch. And try to really put yourself out there.”

“Fine.” He pauses his fingers. “My third is kind of a big thing. The biggest thing.”

“What’s that?”

“The sky.”

“The...sky? Okay, I’m going to need you to elaborate, please.”

“It’s constantly there, but it’s archaic, turbulent, whimsical, vast, and everchanging, differentiating the days even if I’m looking out of the same window. The moon is my favorite companion. It’s why I love to run and why I usually take my runs before dawn. I love racing the moon into another day.”

I lift to straddle him and lean over as he pushes my hair away from my face, gripping it in his fist at the nape of my neck. Hovering above him, I lean down and press a gentle kiss to his lips.

“Racing the moon into another day? That’s waxing pretty poetic, sir. Consider me intrigued. I had no idea you got that deep. I mean,” I wrinkle my nose, “you had a lot to make up for with the coke to pretzels ratio and the admission that you’re a bed-hopping ex-whore.”

He rolls his eyes. “Glad I could appease you.”

“Wouldn’t go that far.”

“And you have no idea how deep I can get because you never stop talking.” He turns us so I’m on my back, and I forget his insult as he grins down at me, his effect overruling any witty quip I could have come back with.

The word infatuation comes to mind as I drink him in because it’s what I feel. When I’m with Eli, it’s too much and not enough all at once.

“Where was I?” He says as if he just briefly got lost in his own thoughts.

“You were insulting me by calling me a motor mouth.”

“I guess I’m going to have to resort to other tactics to make you a better listener.”

“By all means, sir, do your worst.”

Upon his descent to torture me with another kiss, he flits his gaze to his nightstand and pauses. “Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“It’s four in the morning. We’ve been talking for six hours.”

His panicked expression morphs into one of amusement as one side of his mouth lifts in a dopey smile.

“What?”

He gazes down at me, his eyes glittering. “You made me lose time. Unless I’m reading, I rarely ever do that.”

“Because you’re a control freak. So, this is a good thing, right?”

“Yeah,” he dips, his lips hovering. “The best thing.”

His kiss is nothing short of breath-stealing as we quickly get lost in the exploration of tongues. Instinctively, I spread my legs, and for the first time since I joined him in bed hours ago, he sinks between them. When his rock-hard bulge hits my center, my body instantly reacts, and I moan into his mouth. He pulls away, watching his effect as he grips both my wrists and pins them on either side of my pillow. Pale blue eyes intent, he rolls his hips, slowly grinding into me, drawing out another moan.

Lips parted and panting, he stares down at me, soaking in my reaction. With his next pinpointed thrust, my back arches as I lift my hips, needing more. Unashamed, he watches me, tracking my every response as if memorizing them.

“I want you so much,” I admit as he lowers slightly, our hard exhales mingling as he brushes his lips against mine teasingly.

I can feel just how much he wants me as he glides himself along my middle, causing eruptions on my skin, intensifying the ache in my core. With a few more thrusts and deep kisses, I sink into full-blown rapture. Lips swollen, panties soaked, he keeps his maddening pace as I struggle against his hold.

“Eli, let me touch you.” He surprises me by releasing my wrists. Running my fingers along his taut stomach, I lift the hem of his shirt, and he reaches back, pulling it off with a fist.

He reciprocates, pushing my hoodie up, his nostrils flaring when he sees my bare breasts. He covers one with his palm, gently kneading it before rolling my hardened nipple between his fingers.

“Damn,” he murmurs, darting his tongue out and licking the valley between my breasts, outlining the swell before biting gently on the flesh. In response, I thrust my hips up to meet his, and he closes his eyes briefly before grinding harder into me. Body pulsating with desire, I slide my hands down his muscled shoulders, reveling in the feel of his bare skin and the sight of him shirtless. Teasingly he licks around my nipple, his eyes tracing his act before he finally takes one into his mouth and feasts. My back arches as I cry out, and he pulls away, seeming entranced, watching the rapid rise and fall of my chest.

“You’re so beautiful this way,” he rasps out, “I can’t fucking look away from you.” He dips, his kiss hungry, possessive, as he fucks my mouth with his tongue. Physically, I can feel his need matching my own, his body trembling slightly. Boldened by his reaction to me and desperate for more, I pull back from our kiss and look him right in the eyes. “Fuck me, Eli,” I order with breathless delivery.

He stills his hips briefly and grins. “Another demand, huh? How about we cover the bases first.” He moves to lay on his side, his fingers tracing my nipple before he glides them along my stomach and down, rimming the hem of the boxers. Wordlessly, I lift my lower half in permission as his fingers dip, tracing the top of my thong only to travel back up.

Fed up and needy, I grip his hand, guiding it into my panties before running his fingers through my drenched middle.

His eyes immediately close. “Fuck.”

“Not so amusing now, is it?” I croak, gripping his straining erection through his boxers.

Eyes opening, he gazes down at me with unmistakable lust.

“Please,” I urge as he gingerly starts to explore me, separating my slit before whispering the pad of his finger along

my clit, withdrawing just when I start to get the friction I need.

Irritation claws its way through me as he pulls my hand away from his swollen cock just as I begin to trace the head with my finger.

“Eli,” I implore as he continues to touch me with explorative fingers as if I’m not about to combust beneath him.

“First base,” he murmurs, pressing a lingering kiss to my lips, “second,” he whispers over my peaked nipple before pulling it into his mouth and sucking hard. Gripping the back of his head, I pull him tightly to my chest just as he releases it with a suction-filled pop.

“Third,” he again presses a finger into me, and my back bows as he adds another before he starts thrusting them in and out of me. On the edge of death, I squirm beneath him, and he separates them before twisting them up in beckoning. When I cry out his name, his eyes smolder.

He lifts, slowly pulling the boxers down my legs, his eyes devouring me in a thorough sweep. Legs falling open, I gaze up at him as he moves the strip of my thong to the side and spreads me, drinking in the bare sight of me. He stares at my dripping wet sex for long seconds, his expression filled with potent desire.

Blazing with need, skin flushing, he resumes his place at my side before inching his way back into my thong. Gripping his wrist, I rotate my hips and ride his fingers. The look in his eyes combined with the slow lick of his lower lip quickens my climb as he increases the pace. Drawing my nipple into his mouth, he tugs it between his teeth as I begin to soar.

“Right there!” I cry out as he works his fingers furiously just where I need him.

Staring down at me, he darts his tongue out and licks along my lips as I buck into his hand. I grip his shoulders a second before rocketing over the edge into orgasm. Completely in tune with every sensation, I feel the tug of my clit pulse against the meat of his palm, the entirety of my body shuddering as I tighten around his fingers. Unable to keep quiet, he captures my cries with his mouth as I shatter. As the wave subsides, I slowly come back into myself, staring up at him in a blissed-out daze.

“Fuck, that was so hot,” he whispers, eyes glimmering with satisfaction.

Covered in a light sheen of sweat, I soak in his expression and grin.

“You seem pretty proud of yourself—and as much as I hate to admit it—that might have been worth six hours of torture.”

“I want you too, Bee,” he whispers softly, not a trace of smugness in his tone, the tenderness in his voice like an arrow through the chest. “No one else.” His declaration has me pausing as he slowly guides his sweatshirt back down my body.

I move to straddle him. “You mean that.” It’s more of a statement than a question, but he answers the question.

“Of course, I do,” he frowns as if it’s a given. He grips the back of my head and pulls my mouth to his delivering a slow, sensual, dizzying kiss for emphasis.

“So, just for clarity,” I whisper. “Does this mean we’re a thing?”

“For me we are.”

“Me too.”

Some part of me knows I needed this, and my heart is content for now because of it. If it weren’t for his rep, I wouldn’t be nearly as insecure about his sexual history or my place with him. Oddly, behind closed doors, my libido seems raging compared to his. I’m by no means innocent.

He interrupts my thoughts when he again flips me beneath him, gliding his hand up the hoodie, squeezing my hip, and running his thumb along it. He repeats the motion, which has me putty in his hands as my nipples draw tight. He watches them pucker, and his eyes flare.

If the man is this potent with a thumb and a heated look, God help me when he finally steps up to the plate.

“Eli,” I groan, grabbing his wrist in frustration. “Let me touch you. This isn’t fair.”

“Fuck fair,” he whispers, moving his palm over my stomach before dipping the whole of his hand to cup me. “I found a new favorite thing.” Pushing the thin strip of material aside, he

presses his middle finger into me. The addition of another finger has my breaths hitching as I start another fast climb.

“I’m going to chase the moon into today making you come.” My eyes flutter closed as he slides his tongue along my lower lip.

“Nope. Nope. Nope. No delving into the 95 percent, *twenty-year-old Whitney*,” I scold. Turning the shower nozzle to ice cold, I stand under the freezing water a full thirty seconds before shutting it off.

Stepping out, I glare at the woman in the mirror while wrapping myself in a towel. “It’s chemicals,” I remind her vehemently. “The memory of *chemicals*, nothing more.” After a thorough whiplashing, I retreat into the attic, coming to a halt when I see Eli standing in wait in my room, his back to me as he stares down at my open suitcase. I go to speak when he lifts a bottle in his hand.

“I come with a peace offering.”

“I’m not dressed.”

He glances back at me over his shoulder, his powder blues sweeping me from soaked head to feet. Goosebumps erupt as he drinks me in, seeming to make a decision before dipping his chin. “Come here.”

“Eli—”

“Please.” His tone is patient, but urgent.

I take a step toward him.

“Shut the door.”

When I hesitate, he lets out a heavy exhale. “I’m waving the white flag, Whitney. Shut the door.”

I do and turn back to him, anticipation swirling around my chest as my pulse kicks up. He towers a foot over me as I reach him, and familiarity surrounds me. Slowly, as if he’s cornered a frightened animal, he lifts the bottle to my line of sight.

“I use this after long exhausting runs.”

“Thanks.” I move to take the bottle, and he shakes his head. “Let me.”

He lifts his free hand and palms my shoulder, and I wince.

“Thought so,” he whispers, “lay down on your stomach.”

Blood begins to gather low with his order as I do as I’m told, laying on the tiny mattress as he adjusts a pillow under my head.

“Good?”

“Yeah.”

Lifting my soaked hair out of the way, he trails his fingers over the back of my neck, and I involuntarily shudder. The click of the cap sounds as he straddles my hips. Then his warm hands are on me, massaging my shoulders as I let out painful grunts.

“Try and relax. I’m going to find the knots first.”

“O-k-kay.”

“I need to lower the towel, okay?”

“Okay.”

He slowly lowers the towel to just above my ass. His exhale hits my neck, sending a shiver up my spine as he starts to work the oil in—the faint smell of mint filling my nostrils. He digs in with the perfect pressure working just beneath my blades while avoiding my bruised shoulder.

“Jesus, you’re knotted everywhere,” he whispers as he presses in diligently to dismantle them. When I feel a few of them breaking apart, I cry out a little.

“Sorry, I have to—”

“It’s fine, i-it’s good,” I reply, my voice chalky. Then he’s everywhere, his skilled hands a balm to my smarting back as my chest begins to fill with an entirely different ache.

“Tell me where it hurts, Whitney.”

I can’t speak, emotions surfacing as I get lost in his touch, in the magic workings of his gentle palms as he gives pain only to take more away.

“Whitney?”

Tears I can’t help glide down my nose as I turn and release a soft sob into my pillow. Eli doesn’t still his hands at my reaction and instead works them harder. Tension begins to fall away as I let go, no longer mindful of the sounds coming from me.

“It’s okay, Whitney,” he assures me softly as I go lax on the bed, sinking into a ball of emotion and release as he gives me the most amazing massage of my life. Drawn in, I fully immerse myself in sensation.

“It’s okay, Whitney, let it go,” he soothes, his own voice pained in concern. It’s then I realize I’m full-on crying, melting completely the fuck down in a puddle at his hands. Dazed in a cloud of relief, somehow, he manages to shift us, gathering me in his lap with his back against the ancient headboard. I snuffle into his soft T-shirt as he runs soothing palms continually down my back. His strokes ease me back into reality, and once I float into myself, I tense in realization.

“Jesus, I’m embarrassed.”

“Don’t—” He stops my retreat by keeping me plastered to him with an iron grip. Too relaxed to be truly mortified, I sink back into his hold and gaze up at him, my cheek against his chest. For several seconds we just stare at each other, breaths mingling.

“Feel better?” He murmurs, his plump lips close, so close.

“Much better,” I sniff. “Thank you.”

His eyes search mine as he uses a knuckle to brush away a stray tear.

“I didn’t realize how badly I needed that. It’s been a long time since…” I shake my head, “You’re *really good* at that.”

His eyes drop to my lips before lowering and flaring. His entire body tenses beneath me, his expression pained. It’s then I realize that one of my nipples is exposed.

“Whoops, sorry.” Standing, I adjust my towel as he slips from the bed and turns, pausing briefly before retrieving something from my suitcase. When he turns back to me, his UNC hoodie rests folded in his hands.

I pause, staring at the ancient relic that kickstarted our relationship as he speaks up, his voice hoarse.

“I’ve been trying to figure out what to say for hours, and I couldn’t come up with a single fucking thing that feels right in response to what you told me, nor do I want to try to excuse or defend myself. So, I’m not going to.”

Slowly, so slowly, he widens the top of the neck and lowers it over my head as I lift my arms and push them through the sleeves. Eyes locked, he releases the towel, pulling the sweatshirt down my body, the soft fabric grazing my nipples, the bottom hem skimming to rest at the top of my thighs.

“But I want you to know I’ve thought about you a lot over the years, Whitney Collins. A *lot*.” My lips part as he leans in, his whisper covering me in warmth. “You are pretty fucking unforgettable.” Dipping, he presses a lingering kiss to my tear-stained cheek, his lashes my focal point until he flicks his gaze back to me, stunning me stupid.

“I’ll be a friend, Whitney, if you’ll have me.” Unable to fucking think, to breathe, he breaks our stare off, turning and grabbing a ready water bottle and a few ibuprofens, which he must have brought in with him.

“Take these and drink the whole thing. It will help flush the toxins out.”

“Yessir.” I give him a halfhearted mock salute popping the pills and taking a large drink of the water. Ice-colored blue eyes scour me thoroughly before he grabs his magic bottle and heads toward the door. He stops, standing just next to me.

“Try to get as much sleep as you can, okay?”

“I don’t think that will be an issue for me tonight.”

“Can’t say the same,” he swallows, his eyes darting away. “Goodnight.”

“Night,” I rasp out, utterly stunned by the last twenty minutes—the TLC he just showered me with, and his words despite my horrible behavior. I stare at the door as he closes it behind him. Echoes of my time with him remain in the room as I wrap my arms around myself, surrounded by nostalgia and the feel of the sweatshirt on my naked skin. Longingly, I gaze at the closed door, a fast fantasy forming of him bursting through it to claim me. Butterflies unstoppable, I do my best to clear my head and follow orders, downing the water before diving into bed. I surprise myself by easily sinking into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Wretched Gretchen, aka my aunt, does us all the honor of arriving promptly at 8 a.m. the following morning. Due to my massage-induced coma, I missed Eli and Peyton's daybreak date—though I'm positive by the way they're huddled on the couch together when I come downstairs, it was kept. Warmth from the fire surrounds me as I gaze at the two of them watching *The Lion King* on Thatch's iPad.

"What you looking at, sis?" Brenden smirks, coffee in hand where he stands at the threshold of the kitchen.

"Oh, that pause? I knew I smelled something...*foul*," I snark, staring pointedly at him.

"That's the stench of success. Drink it in," he fans his hand as if sharing his essence in my direction before heading to the table just as the doorbell rings.

Dread cloaks my every pore because I know, without a doubt, on the other side stands Satan's mistress. Just as I open the door, she barks her first command.

"Well, hurry up, girl. I'm not getting any warmer."

"Good morning, Aunt Gretchen," I say, opening the door wide because Gretchen has a little girth that only adds to her menacing gait.

Wretched Gretchen is the very definition of the hairy-mole-infused aunt that makes you want to Austin Powers her by screaming “mo-lie, mo-lie, mo-lie” as she comes toward you for unwanted affection. She’s every bit fitting of the villain relative included in every holiday horror story. The terrifying aunt that brings over the mortifying bunny suit and makes you try it on, reveling in your humiliation for her own amusement.

Over the years, I’ve gotten a lot less sheepish around her and attuned to her snarks and quirks, which oddly, is more terrifying than the brush of a hairy mole kiss. Reason being? If I’m not careful, she could be the very picture of my distant future.

Gretchen never married, never had children, and lives alone in her mansion in the mountains in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Thankfully—for all of us—this is a short drive away, which makes her visit brief. Gretchen steps into the house dressed in sweats and an oversized coat more fit for an Alaskan winter hike. She’s got the build of my father, and though she’s high maintenance, there’s nothing glaringly feminine about her. Even her poorly dyed, ink-black hair is cropped close to her head.

“How have you been?”

She gives me the side-eye and harrumphs. “You would know if you picked up the phone once in a while.” Her eyes narrow. “I see we aren’t using the antiwrinkle cream I gave you last Christmas.” While stifling my first long exhale, she delivers her second order. “Go get my presents, would you? I’ve popped the trunk.”

Great, more kitty littered wrapped Jell-O. Okay, so maybe she doesn’t give us Jell-O molds filled with Tidy Cat because she doesn’t have cats. If she did, I’m pretty sure they’d gang up on her and smother her in her sleep.

“Happy to,” I say, grabbing my jacket as Eli speaks up from behind me.

“Actually, Whitney took a nasty spill yesterday, so I’ll be happy to get them.”

I turn back to see Eli framed by the sunlight streaming through the glass door, and his angelic coifed hair is lit perfectly as angels sing a brief “ahhh” in unison. I swear his right front

tooth sparkles like a diamond as the rest of the morning haze engulfs him.

I shake my head briefly as he slips on his coat.

“And who are you?” Gretchen asks, her eyes sweeping Eli in ridicule.

“I’m a co-worker of Brenden’s,” he answers matter of fact, slipping on his gloves before leaning in and dropping his voice suggestively. “And Whitney’s former *lova*.”

My mouth drops along with Gretchen’s as Eli dramatically pushes the glass of the front door open with both hands, using the hangtime of the door to strut out, swagger in full effect.

Gretchen’s dead stare darts to me, and it takes everything I have not to laugh. Instead of trying to come up with a barrage of acceptable excuses for his behavior, I shrug.

“He was a sensational *lova*,” I say before following him out of the door and taking the stairs two at a time to catch up. Laughter spills from my lips when I reach him at the trunk of her SUV. “Okay, what the hell was that?”

He flashes a grin at me as he sorts through the packages in her trunk. “I’m pretty decent at reading people, but with her, I didn’t have to. I physically sensed the fire and brimstone on the other side of the door the minute she knocked. As soon as you greeted her, I remembered who she was. And I quote, ‘Wretched Gretchen is my worst nightmare. A mean, bitter old spinster who comes out of her Grinch cave once a year to torment the Collins’ Whos.’ I remember the stories. She’s been torturing you and your family your whole lives.”

“I really did talk a lot, didn’t I?”

“You never, *ever* shut up. But it was adorable.” He stacks a few shoe-box-sized packages in my arms as I hold them out. I take the time to study his profile before letting myself sweep over him. He looks gorgeous as ever in a plaid shirt with a dark grey denim half-collar which is flipped up, cuffed dark jeans, and expensive wool-lined boots. The cologne drifting off him beckons me closer as he continues, a memory-induced smile lifting one side of his mouth. “But that was you. You were curious and excited, about life, about *everything*.” He pauses, and

I see the mischievous glint in his eyes as he turns to me. “What do you say we tag team her today?”

“How?” I ask, unable not to return his budding grin.

“Every time she comes at one of you, we’ll toss it back to her tenfold. If we’re successful, we could have her fleeing by lunch.” Arms loaded, he manages to shut her trunk and shoots a conspiratorial wink my way. “What do you say?”

“I don’t know. We’re her only family. She may be horrible, but I feel sorry for her. She doesn’t have anyone.”

“She chose her life, Whitney.”

“I know, but still...”

We walk side by side toward the house as he carries the bulk of the load and gently nudges me. “If you change your mind, let me know.”

“Do you want me to send out a bat signal or something?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ll know the second you decide.”

I stop at the foot of the stairs and glance over at him. “You think you can read me that well?”

“I guess we’ll see,” he says confidently before heading up the stairs.

I may have zeroed in on his ass on the way up.



“Who made the cheese ball?” Gretchen asks, shoveling a stuffed cracker in her mouth, leaving a thick glop of residue on the side of it. Keeping my repulsed shudder inside, I speak up. “I did.”

“Not enough Worcestershire.”

“I followed Grammy P’s recipe to the letter,” I defend weakly.

“It’s delicious,” Mom assures me loading her own cracker, her voice filled with the typical edge she gets when Gretchen graces us with her presence.

Gretchen scours the room as we all sit gathered around her, awaiting her annual verdict of disapproval. It's as if she's deemed herself the matriarch. Her eyes float to Peyton, who sits on the floor between Serena's legs, sorting an oversized puzzle. Even she isn't immune to Peyton's charms, and in a rare effort, she softens her voice addressing him. "Peyton, are you excited about Santa?"

Peyton immediately stiffens, snapping his head up, his eyes crazed as he belts out, "No, Santa! Shut *you mouph!*"

Gretchen's eyes bulge, and she wastes no time belittling Serena. "You should not let your children speak to adults like that."

Sadly, even Serena cowers under her vicious backlash. "Sorry, Aunt Gretchen, he's got a huge aversion to him."

"Even so," she says, eyeing Peyton with disdain before focusing on Serena and going in for the kill, "are you still a housewife wasting your degree?"

"Actually, I work with Thatch—"

Gretchen raises her hand, cutting her off. "A woman needs to make her *own living*, you know," she eyes Thatch, "just in case."

"We've been doing fine," Thatch defends as the tension grows thicker, and I can see my mother's temperature rising, red blooming in her face.

"How is Tennessee," Dad cuts in, reading my mother's posture as her left eye begins to twitch. "You start those renovations? Because I don't know if you are aware, but Thatch here—"

"The project is finished," she says, and I bristle, knowing the only thing Gretchen has more of than unwanted opinions—is money. While working on the porch with Dad, Thatch discovered his love for building and took classes learning how to draft blueprints before becoming a master foreman in construction. His talent is astounding, and the recent housing boom in Nashville keeps him busy. Together, he and Serena have created a pretty successful venture. It was an insult that she didn't so much as reach out to Thatch when she decided to renovate her six-thousand square foot house.

“Cost me a pretty penny, too,” she digs as Thatch averts his gaze out of the window, his jaw hardening. Seeming satisfied with the reaction, Gretchen diverts her attention to my brother.

“So, Brenden, I hear you ventured out on your own in business? Not very smart in these times.”

“Actually, it was the best time,” he says before sipping out of his tumbler, which I know is full of Mom’s eggnog. The bastard is numbing himself while we’re forced to deal with Ursula the sea bitch and sobriety. “Business is good.”

“Until it isn’t,” Gretchen remarks snidely, wiggling to better fit in the recliner she commandeered from Erin *while* she was feeding Wyatt a bottle.

It’s then I feel Eli’s gaze home in on me, as it has several times the last half hour of interrogation.

“Should we exchange gifts?” I speak up.

“We’ll get to it,” Gretchen says dismissively in the way of a Queen addressing a peasant.

“And you,” she addresses Eli, whose smile lifts as she shifts all focus on him. “What is your purpose here?”

“Like you, I don’t have a family of my own.” His quick response and easy answer has my heart flinching. “So Brenden was kind enough to invite me.”

“He’s been a blessing,” Mom interjects, a slight warning in her voice.

“Good looking man, with a job, and still a bachelor at your age?” She scoffs. “You must be close to forty. Is there a reason you’re playing Peter Pan?”

“Pardon?” Eli feigns ignorance, though I know full well he’s baiting her to take the brunt of her malicious intent.

The slight lift of Gretchen’s lips is practically a metaphor for her rolling up her sleeves. I narrow my eyes. It’s one thing for *me* to call Eli out—we shared time together and a sexual past—but it’s another entirely for my intrusive asshole of an aunt to ridicule him.

“While I don’t have a family, these are my *blood* relatives. Where are your pare—”

“Bat!” I shout, and the entire family looks over to me as though I’ve lost my mind. Eli chuckles.

Smooth, Whit. Really smooth.

“Bat?” Mom asks, her brows fusing together.

“I thought I saw one,” I point out of one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. “A bat. A giant, *hairy, imposing*, blood dripping from its teeth *bat*.”

“Ewww,” Gracie says, “I don’t like bats.”

Eli smirks at me as we exchange words telepathically.

No prisoners? He asks.

Off with her mol-ie head! I reply.

Want to go first? He asks, ever the gentlemen.

After you, kind sir.

He dips his chin in confirmation.

“You know, Gretchen,” Eli says, standing. “I was wondering if you had any advice on that. You know, being *alone, all the time*, with nothing else to do but observe the world around you. Whatever do you do to pass all your time...*alone?*”

“I’ve had my fair share of suitors over the years.”

“Oh, no doubt,” Eli says, warming his hands in front of the fire. “Wonder why they didn’t stick?” Brenden smirks and sips out of his cup, his eyes screaming, *‘get her.’*

“Well, suitors aren’t spaghetti are they, Eli?”

“No, they definitely aren’t, and I’m sure you enlightened them on exactly why they didn’t suit your lifestyle, which is doing what again?”

“I’m into...” Gretchen wiggles in the recliner, “art.”

“Art. Historical? Modern? Are you a Monet fan or more of a Pollock type of woman? Who painted the last piece you bought?”

“I’m actually...I paint.”

“Oil or acrylic?”

“A bit of both...” she says, darting her eyes around.

“Odd. Many painters stick to one type so they can hone in on their craft.”

“Well, I’m only dabbling at the moment.”

“Ah, dabbling.”

“And...I, uh, garden too.”

“I can tell by the tan,” Eli says, eyeing her paste white skin. He presses in by walking over to the recliner, his eyes intent as he kneels in front of her chair. “Since you and I seem to have *so much* spare time, maybe I’ll come for a visit. I can check out your paintings.”

“Well, I don’t have any to show you right now, per se.”

Eli nods as if in perfect understanding as he takes her Allen-sized hand in his, his eyes softening. “Well, when you’ve finished, I’d be honored if you would show me one.”

“Don’t be absurd,” she says, darting her eyes around to each of us before he recaptures her gaze with his voodoo icicle eyes. “Why would you come all that way just to see my painting?”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right? Art, much like *people*, can be largely misunderstood unless the *right* person comes along to decipher it. Even then, it’s such a personal thing, isn’t it? I have faith it will be worth the trip.”

My frigid aunt visibly softens where she sits as I shake my head, barely managing to hide my smile. I should have known Eli would level her with his wit before reducing her to a pliable puddle of insecurity only to build her back up.

His voice is the perfect mix of stern and coaxing when he speaks again. “What do you say we exchange gifts, now?”

When my aunt nods, seemingly confused that for the first time in the history of *ever*, she’s lost control of the room, Eli’s lips lift in victory, and he winks at me as he stands.

My wretched Aunt Gretchen left just after lunch, but not before giving Eli her address. My mother left lipstick marks on both of Eli’s cheeks as she drove away.

Tag team, *my ass*.

The smooth bastard.

Ruby down. *Serena* to go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Thatch and I lug the large plastic container we were asked to retrieve down the stairs before setting it in front of the tree. Gracie claps her hands together with glee as Ruby walks in from the kitchen, setting down a silver tray lined with bright red drinks, cherry stabbed swords hooked on the rim of the glasses.

“Kiddie cocktails,” Gracie informs me. “It’s just 7up and cherries, but it’s sooo good.” She lifts a plastic cup to me. “Try it.”

I take a sip of the offered drink. “Pretty good.”

“It’s tradition,” Serena chimes in as Allen snoozes in his recliner with Peyton, ears on the table next to him. Brenden, who opted out of decorating, sits on the love seat, flipping through the channels. Whitney clicks on the tree lights, the sun setting behind her where she stands in front of the windows, the amber light filtering through her hair, making it impossible to look away. Smiling, she glances over at me, and it’s like a shot to the chest. I grin back, but she breaks our gaze.

Gracie rattles with excitement next to me waiting on Ruby’s permission to start as I stand ready with a ladder.

“Now, Grammy?”

“One second,” Whitney says, walking over to where a small speaker-sized Alexa sits on a nearby table before bending and whispering a command. A second later, a rift of country blares through all speakers in the house, and Brenden jumps in his seat while Allen and Peyton remain comatose. Brenden’s protest rings out over the roar of the music. “Ah, come on!”

Every one of the Collins women animates in recognition of the song.

“You two remember this?” Ruby asks, eyeing Whitney and Serena, clearly taken aback.

“Of course,” they speak up simultaneously.

“It’s the perfect start,” Ruby admonishes, her eyes misting over. “Your grandmother would have loved this.”

“We listened to it every year here,” Whitney reminds her.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Kenny and Dolly’s Christmas album,” Brenden adds in. “And do we really have to?”

“Brenden,” Ruby says in warning, “you’re going to miss this one day. You think you won’t, but you will.” Erin joins us, walking into the living room, Wyatt on her hip and Conner plastered to her other. It’s easy to tell Conner is excited but too timid to ask for a place in the lineup.

“Conner, will you help me?” I ask. “I don’t want to break anything.”

She nods enthusiastically as Erin mouths a ‘thank you’ to me. Within minutes the Collins women, Erin included, are singing along to music I’ve never heard as Conner hands me some simple ball ornaments to start decorating the top of the tree. As Thatch collapses on the couch next to Brenden, I realize I’m the only man taking part, but I’m not at all upset about it because I can clearly see the sentiment in their collective eyes as they carry out decades of tradition. Something I’ve never had.

“Remember this?” Serena laughs, pulling a popsicle stick constructed Christmas tree ornament from one of the boxes, which is covered in glitter and globs of dried paste.

“The first ornament you ever made,” Ruby muses.

“I can’t believe you saved it,” Serena says in wonder.

“She still has our baby teeth in her jewelry box,” Brenden speaks up from the recliner, another stolen cup of Ruby’s eggnog in his tumbler. “Hoarder.”

“And your foreskin,” Ruby adds, which has me chuckling.

“Mom, that’s disturbing. Seriously, you need to toss that,” Brenden says with a shudder.

“And your belly buttons,” Ruby informs her children. All three of them fake gag as Ruby defends her choices. “Some women eat the placenta, okay? Give it a rest.”

Inhaling the scent of the tree as I secure the last ball, I descend the stepladder and open a box marked fragile, tossing a nervous glance at Conner. “Maybe we better leave this to them.”

“You scared?” She asks.

“Kind of. Can you keep a secret?”

She nods.

“This is my first time decorating a *real* Christmas tree.”

Her eyes widen. “First time ever?”

“I’m pretty sure. I do remember when I had my first real tree. Your aunt Whitney bought it for me a few weeks before Christmas. She snuck it into my bedroom really late at night, so when I woke up, it was at the foot of my bed. I still can’t figure out how she did it.”

“Wow. That’s awesome.”

“It was so *awesome*. She said she stole the idea from a movie. Do you know which one?”

Conner shakes her head before plucking a glittering star and holding it out to me. “Here, you do this one. I won’t tell your secret.”

“Promise?”

She nods again as I secure it on a nearby branch. “The next one is yours. You find it.”

She opens a shoebox littered with old newspaper. Unwrapping the first ornament, I burst into laughter when I see

the Pringles cap covered in construction paper. In the center is a picture of Whitney sporting a chili bowl haircut along with two missing teeth.

“What’s so funny?” Whitney asks as I thrust the ornament in her direction for inspection. “Oof, girl, you were *fire*.”

She grimaces. “Yeah, thanks a lot, Mom, for that haircut. I can’t believe you thought it was a good idea.”

“You were all adorable with them. Even Brenden.”

“I’ll never forgive you,” Brenden says, standing in decision to participate and sorting through the box until he finds his own chili bowl ornament. “I’m confiscating this.”

“The hell you are,” Ruby snaps as Brenden towers above her, easily holding the ornament out of reach.

“Give that to me right now, or you lose your winky.” When Brenden refuses, Ruby socks him in the stomach. Brenden grimaces and bends, and Ruby jumps and snatches the ornament from his hand before handing it to me. I promptly take a picture of it with my cell phone and give him a wink. “Future blackmail.”

“You’re all terrible humans,” Brenden declares, swiping his eggnog tumbler off the end table and tossing some back.

“That better not be my eggnog,” Ruby says, eyeing the cup suspiciously.

Brenden cowers away, cupping the top of it from view.

“Little shit,” Ruby mutters under her breath. “I’m not making more.”

“Yes, you will because I’m your one and only *baby boy*,” Brenden smirks at me before slurping more from his tumbler.

“Crap,” Whitney says, eyeing her own phone and stepping away to answer.

“Hello? This is she. Thank you, yes, I’ll be here.” She turns back toward us.

“Guys, I’m going to have to tap out for a bit. The wrecker is on his way to pick up my car, and I need to clean it out.”

“We’ll do all the regular boring ornaments until you’re done,” Serena offers, sorting through another box.

Whitney turns to Ruby. “Mom, are the trash bags still—”

“Beneath the sink.”

Whitney heads toward the kitchen, and I grip her wrist. “Need help?” We both stare down at where we’re connected before she gently pulls her hand free.

“I’ve got it, thanks.” Her reply is far too civil, friendly even, and it grates at me because she’s fucking determined not to engage, even more to continue to treat me like a stranger. Frustrated but knowing I need to take Evie’s advice, I make my way back to the ladder catching a hushed conversation on the other side of the tree.

“Her car now, too, Mom. This is the last thing she needs, and she so deserved that promotion.”

“She’ll come back swinging,” Ruby assures Serena, “she always does.”

“I’m worried about her.”

A pause.

“Me, too. But this is Whitney.”

“For once, I just want things to go her way. I want to see her happy. She deserves it. If she’d quit dating these idiots—”

“I liked the last one.”

“Who?”

“Pete.”

“That’s not the last one. The last one was Kyle, and she dumped him a month ago.”

“She never mentioned him to me.”

“Because he wasn’t worth mentioning. It’s like she’s purposefully scraping the bottom of the barrel to make it easier on herself when it doesn’t work out. The night we got here, she told me point blank she would never have kids and probably wouldn’t ever get married.”

Silence and then. “She said that?”

“Yeah.”

Ruby’s voice is full of concern when she speaks. “I hate hearing it.”

“This one?” Conner lifts an ornament to my line of sight.

“How about you put it up,” I offer and lift her to hang it on a higher branch. Conner giggles above me as she secures the ornament onto the tree, my gaze following Whitney as she wraps a scarf around her neck, pulling on her beanie before exiting the front door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Sitting behind the wheel of my car, a trash bag full of mostly junk and a few personal items packed in the passenger seat, I take one last look around my sedan. It's just a car, but I find myself oddly emotional about it for reasons I don't understand.

Sitting in contemplation and getting nowhere with the reasoning, I'm thankful when the headlights of the tow truck appear behind me. When the driver hops out, I check the rearview and am momentarily zapped by the sight that greets me—messy two-toned spiked blond hair and sun-tinted skin despite the season. He's dressed in nothing but dark jeans and a grey thermal that accentuates his insane build. There's something inherently sexy about his grease-stained tan boots.

Before I'm able to fully grasp the looks of him, he's standing at my window, enticing hazel eyes peering back at me. I can't hear it, but I'm sure he's chuckling as he gently taps on the glass. Dazed by the unexpected sight of him, I turn the key like a moron to let the window down instead of exiting the car.

“Saying your goodbyes?” He asks, his accompanying chuckle much sexier than the one I imagined.

“She was a good car,” I reply, still taken aback by the hottie looming above me.

He surveys my car as I stare at his prominent Adam's apple, and immediately my thoughts shift to Eli.

Stop it, Collins.

The sexy stranger eyes my sedan as I ogle him. "The order says you want to junk it, but I can check out the issue and get it back to you with an estimate if you want."

"No, she's a goner. It's time for something new, and I'm okay with letting her go. But," I glance around, "as silly as it sounds, we've been through a lot together."

"Trust me. I'm the last man you need to feel foolish in front of when getting sentimental about a car. I have cars with plenty of stories. Some of them my favorites."

"Thanks, I think I needed to hear that."

When he glances down at his boots, I see a sliver of his past cloaking his gaze. "Trust me, I can relate."

"I'm surprised you were able to get to me today, with the holidays here and all."

"I was at the shop screwing around and saw the order. I guess you could say I'm a workaholic who has a really understanding family. I get too restless just sitting around."

"I get that, totally."

"Allow me," he says, opening the car door for me. It's then I see the front door open in my peripheral, Eli on the other side of the glass.

The driver's grin is unmistakable as he's scrutinized by an icy glare, and he doesn't so much as spare him a glance. "Seems you have an admirer. Your husband?"

"Ha, no. Ironically he's my ex. My *college ex*, who just so happened to start working with my brother a few months ago. My brother who decided to bring him to our family Christmas. Would you believe me if I told you I've had a recent run of bad luck mixed with a spectacular side of shitty coincidence?"

"Sure I would, and that is *one hell* of a coincidence."

"Yeah, well," I widen my eyes. "Merry Christmas to *me*."

"Bad history?"

“Painful,” I say and then nod my head. “Sorry, that was too much information.”

“Again, I can relate, and I’m a fan of people who speak their mind instead of making bullshit small talk.”

“Yeah?”

One side of his mouth lifts, and it’s sexy as hell. “Yeah.”

“Well then, maybe you need to overshare, so I don’t feel so self-conscious.”

“Trust me, the car attachment, the ex, it’s highly similar to something I went through not too long ago. But there’s an upside.”

“What’s that?”

“The growing pains may sting like a motherfucker, but they’re necessary to help you figure out what’s most valuable. Once you know what’s most important to you, it all becomes crystal clear.”

“Then I’m looking forward to it. You know, I literally made a deal with myself that I was going to dump my baggage and buck up the rest of this holiday.”

“Not going so well, huh?”

“Much easier as thought than execution. How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing. You gave me an excuse to leave the garage. We’ll call it even.”

“Really? Thanks.”

“You sure you don’t want to keep it?” He darts his gaze over my shoulder toward the porch, his double entendre clear.

“Pretty sure.”

“Well, I can tell you this much, he doesn’t share the same sentiment.” He chuckles again. “Look, I know we just met, but do you mind if I do you a *real* favor?”

I draw my brows. “You’ve done enough.”

“Bear with me, and trust me?”

“O-kay.” In the next second, he’s crowding me against the car, his woody scent enveloping me as he splays gloved hands on either side of me on the roof. I gawk at him in surprise.

“Close your mouth, beautiful, and listen up. In about five seconds, I’m going to whisper to you, and you’re going to nod. That’s all you have to do.”

“O-k-kay.”

He peers down at me, oozing sex appeal, a smug smirk on his lips as he slowly leans in. “Name’s Sean,” he says in a whisper.

“Whitney,” I reply, unable to keep from comparing his scent to Eli’s, which is slightly similar.

“You may be ready to let it go,” he says in a seductive whisper, his posture dripping sex, “but I promise you *he’s* not. Nod if you understand me.”

I slowly nod.

“He’s about a second away from busting through the glass door.”

“You’re terrible,” I giggle like a seventeen-year-old.

He leans in closer and grins. “In three, two, one.”

The storm door bursts open, and I look over to see Eli pushing up his sleeves as he charges toward us, his frame taught, his expression the picture of annoyance as he makes his way down the stairs.

“Need some help out here, Whitney?” It takes everything I have not to laugh at the expression on his face as he rounds my car. Sean doesn’t flinch, doesn’t so much as move, completely unphased as Eli scours him with murder in his eyes.

He’s jealous, and it’s tangible. Sean’s eyes prompt me not to react as I fight to keep my smile at bay and my voice even. “I told you I’ve got this.”

“Yeah,” Sean assures him, his hazel eyes raking me in a lusty sweep. “I was just taking care of her.”

Eli looks ready to pounce as he stops just a foot away. “You’re here to *tow* her car, are you not?”

“I am, but the surprise was on me when I pulled up and saw who for. Whitney and I have history, and we were just reminiscing a little, weren’t we?”

“Yeah,” I say, a little breathless at the testosterone overload surrounding me.

“One heavy summer, wasn’t it?” Sean covers his chest with his hand. “Until she broke my heart.” He says it in a way that even *I’m* convinced. It’s then I know I’ve met the king of all bullshitters. Well, coming only second to the man standing inches away, posturing up as if he’s about to engage in a prison brawl.

Unabashedly, Sean continues. “Now I’m trying to convince her to get a drink with me.” Sean turns to Eli in challenge. “Something we can help *you* with?”

Eli’s eyes ice over. “She’s fine where she’s at.”

“Yeah?” Sean looks from him to me. “Let’s let her decide.”

“I better not,” I say. “We’re decorating the tree tonight.”

Sean pushes off the car. “I get it. Too bad. But if you change your mind, you know where to find me.” *Lip bite!* “I’ll get you taken care of.”

Unbelievable.

The insinuation clear, Sean swaggers back to the truck pulling a chain from the reel before situating himself effortlessly beneath my car.

“They sent me to come and get you,” Eli grits out. “Everyone’s waiting.”

“I’ll be in when we’re done.”

“Kick it in neutral, would you, babe?” Sean hollers out, getting another dig in.

It’s childish, but in my defense, it wasn’t my idea. Eli was possessive enough when we were together, but the tension in his frame is outright hostile. He’s ready to maim and murder, but why? He’s only been back in my life for mere days. It’s territorial penis shit, has to be, because Eli’s got just as much ape in him as any other man. Sometimes more so. Expression loaded, Eli and I stare off as Sean brings it home by using my short name.

“Whit?”

“Yeah, on it,” I reply, realizing Eli has me boxed against the door much the same way Sean did. “Excuse me.”

Eli steps back, allowing me just enough space to get inside my car. I turn the key and put it into neutral. Eli towers over me where I sit in the driver’s seat. “You dated this fucking guy?”

“Summer thing. I was restless.”

Blatant jealousy. I have to admit it’s gratifying. But these are dangerous games, games that have me realizing I’m way too concerned with how my ex feels, so I decide to tone it down. “We didn’t have much in common.”

“Clearly.”

“How presumptuous,” I say dryly before addressing Sean, “I’m all set here.” His eyes follow my every move before he looks back at Sean, who’s lowering the flatbed of the truck.

Eli jerks his head. “You’re not leaving with him.”

“As if that’s your call,” I snort. “But I guess you didn’t hear me decline his invitation. He’s a great guy. What’s your issue?”

“I don’t like him...*for you*...I don’t trust him. He’s hiding something.”

“Eli—”

“I’ll tell them you’re coming,” he snaps, taking me by surprise with his venom before turning abruptly and charging back into the house. Sean walks over to where I stand, seeming satisfied.

“Sorry, couldn’t resist.”

“That was awesome,” I laugh. “Oscar-worthy.”

“Bet it up. That man is going to go apeshit alpha on you tonight.” He shrugs. “Maybe something to look forward to? Otherwise, I apologize for stirring up a hornet’s nest.”

“He used to be impenetrable. It was nice to see him riled up. And you’re way too good at that.”

Sean shrugs. “It’s both gift and curse.”

“Well, thank you again, Sean, and I hope you have an awesome Christmas.”

“Blinds just parted,” he whispers before taking off my beanie and briefly kissing my forehead. He pulls back, handing me the hat, and grins. “That should finish him off. Merry Christmas, Whitney.”

“Same to you, Sean.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



The King's Garage tow truck pulls away with the smug prick inside as I toss back the National Lampoon's moose mug filled with Ruby's eggnog—which I procured from Brenden. Nog I've been slurping repeatedly while plotting to exact my revenge by leaving a *scathing* Yelp review.

Lame as it may be, it's the only retribution I can think of that doesn't include jail time for ripping that bastard's fucking nuts off. I've never wanted to swing at another man more in my life than I did when that asshole came onto her like that, taking great measures to make sure I knew he'd been *there*.

The fact that she had a fling with that greasy-handed douche bag was enough to light my veins on fire and send me straight for Brenden's go-to numbing agent. After she came inside—trash bag full, smiling from her driveway run in—she went straight back to decorating the tree. I took a corner with my moose tumbler remaining visible enough to be considered present but far away enough not to poison the mood. Lurking in the shadows, I go against my nature and take in another mouthful because desperate times call for alcohol-induced measures. Brenden warned me as he shook a few dashes of nutmeg on my concoction to sip slowly—that his mother's nog has a way of sneaking up on a guy. So far, the drink hasn't helped at all to ease the green-eyed-monster-induced Grinch-sized fit festering inside

me, urging me to toss the tree out of the fucking window before shredding presents with my teeth.

She's driving me insane with her indifference, and I'm letting her. The one woman whom I've always let push me beyond my tolerable limits.

Old habits Die Harding the fuck out of me.

Jesus, she's so far in your head that you're using movie titles as verbs.

When the last box is empty, and the tree is weighted with ornaments, Gracie cuts the lights as they all step back and admire their handiwork.

As though she can sense my raging unease, Whitney scours the room to find me skulking in the hallway, her smile fading when she sees the moose mug in my hand. She heads straight for me, stopping a mere foot away before gripping the antler handle and drinking it down in a few gulps.

"Come on," she sighs, "you know you don't drink the hard stuff."

"Maybe I do."

"It's not you."

"And dating a guy like that *is you*?" I scoff. "Well, I guess it shouldn't surprise me. From what I've gathered, it is you."

Her eyes dim.

Fuck. I'm already going there.

"You know the saying. Variety is the spice of life." She circles the tumbler staring down at it before draining the last drop. "You should know *Campus Casanova*."

"You know all too fucking well that's not who I was. You chose to believe that bullshit."

She shrugs. "Never found any evidence to the contrary. Look," she says, placing the empty glass in my hand. "I don't want to fight."

Golden brown eyes pierce mine, and the familiar ache that fills me doesn't seem so out of place anymore. She gazes up at

me, recovered from my shitty job and seeming completely at peace while I feel anything but.

Placing her hands on my chest, she pushes off her toes and presses a slow kiss to my jaw while I keep my arms at my sides, battling the urge to circle her, bring her closer, bring her back to me.

“Mistletoe,” she whispers as I look up to see I’m standing directly beneath one of the many sprigs Ruby hung throughout the house. “I’ll ignore the fact that you just insulted me on account of you’re still a terrible drunk. I’m not doing this with you, and you have absolutely no right to play jealous.”

“I’m not *playing* shit.”

My rebuttal has her pausing. “Well, that’s absurd.”

Maybe, but it’s the fucking truth.

When she runs her palm along my searing chest in a placating gesture, she might as well be stabbing me.

“Come on, let’s just get along, okay?” She turns, spotting Peyton at the foot of the kitchen, and races toward him before scooping him into her arms. He giggles in delight as she playfully nuzzles his neck, her eyes brimming with adoration. I stare after them, helpless to the laundry list of shit I’m feeling.

Memory serves me another heaping tablespoon of remorse as I recall feeling the same helplessness as I was falling for her. A plethora of emotions—both good and bad—warring throughout me with brutal force as they did the entirety of the eight months we dated. And long after.

The kicker of it? I’m not hiding from her or playing games. I’ve been nothing but honest with *myself*, with her, and how I’m feeling moment to moment since I got here, and it’s gotten me nowhere.

Had I known I would already be this far under her spell in a matter of days, I might have prepared more, but in truth, I had no fucking chance. The mere sight of her set it all off, pushing me back to a familiar place—pride in the backseat, confidence fluctuating, temper flaring, heart slamming around in my chest like a ticking time bomb, and my cock constantly between half-mast and full salute whenever she’s near.

She's been just as responsive physically but nowhere near as liberal verbally. She feels it, and she's been feeling it, and that's what I'm clinging to at this point. Whitney was thinking about our first time together the night she pushed the hair away from my face as we did dishes. I'd bet my fucking life on it.

She's avoided me long enough. Tonight. Tonight we will have the conversation she doesn't want to have. I will get through to her.

It's going down tonight.



Two hours later...

Eggnog Moose Mugs consumed—5

Words exchanged with Whitney—0

One eye closed, I focus on the mouthy blonde prey between the handle of my moose cup. Once I have her in my crosshairs, I rise to my feet as she moves toward the kitchen. Going in, I follow the tell-tale jingle of the bells on the tips of her elf slippers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Opening the fridge, I pull out the remainder of the cheese ball and sense Eli behind me, his cologne wafting into my nose as he steps in close, his chest brushing my back.

“I think it’s time we had a lil chat,” he slurs.

Turning, I gaze up at him as he crowds me against the open fridge, eyes narrowed and glossy.

“You like geasy hands? I can get dirty, and you know,” he draws out, “but if you needs a remind you, I’ll fuck you right now against dez condiments.” He plucks a bottle next to my head. “against this habanero zauce.”

“Whoa, tiger, I don’t think my parents would appreciate that.”

He grips my chin, squishing my lips together with his fingers.

“Pet *you’d* appreciate it.”

I pull my jaw from his grip. “Maybe instead of a lil talk, you might want to think about a lil nap?”

“You needs a man, Whitney?” He pounds his chest with his fist. “I’ll be your man. I cut the wood, make pantakes, build you a snowman e’ry day.” He fists a bundle of raw carrots from the second shelf, “with a fucking carrot nose, and it’ll be the *bess* one. You tink *greasy hands* would do that for you?” He shakes

his head adamantly, nearly headbutting me as he leans in, his lips a breath away. “No, he would *not*.”

“Eli, you’re piss drunk,” I say, wrestling the victimized carrots from his palm and putting them back on the shelf.

“Maybe,” he sloppily bobs his head. “But I know what you mean.”

“I’m not sure you do.”

“I fucked your hand in the shower dis morning, for *you*.” He belts out his next words proudly, making me jump. “AND YESTERDAY!”

Eyes wide, I glance around and see we’re relatively safe from little ears. “Eli, maybe we shouldn’t be admitting this in the kitchen.” He leans in, grabbing the sides of the fridge doors for balance, his voice barely above a whisper. “Do you still trim your pussy in a strip? I’m fucking dying to know. I loved the tickled of it on my gnose. I loved eating you.” He somehow manages to lick his lip seductively as heat climbs my spine. “I’m hungry now.” He lifts his chin with his next declaration. “I can make Tiny Tim come in sithy seconds.”

Unable to help my laugh, he proudly lifts one side of his mouth.

“Yep, you’re feelsing me,” he leans in. “Let’s go be *alone*.”

“I’m not sure you’re conveying what you really want to say.”

“I don’t care who knows.” He waves a dismissive hand. “They see how bad me want you.” He nods over his shoulder. “C’mon, gab the habenro sauze.”

“I’ll pass because that sounds pretty painful.”

His eyes rake over me. “You know what I can do?”

“I’m pretty sure your brain is telling you anything is possible right now.”

He stretches his arms out against the small cart island behind him. Shoulders hitched next to his ears, he manages to steady himself on the rolling cart and lifts his brows. “I’m going to give you a real man now. Vermy merry Christmas.”

“Yeah? Great. You seem to be the gift that keeps on giving.”

“S’go, baby, I got sorry to do, make you happy,” he says, again nodding over his shoulder toward the den just as the cart begins to roll.

By the time I reach him, he’s veering off and on the verge of more brain damage.

“Oh, shit,” Thatch says as he rushes to help me just before Eli wipes out. We manage to get him standing as Eli greets Thatch. “I’ve got this.” He nudges Thatch and nods my way as if he’s about to seal the deal with me, and Thatch chuckles. “How much did you drink, man?”

“Hey, Thatch,” Eli says as though seeing him for the first time as Thatch secures Eli’s arm around him, keeping him hoisted on his shoulder.

“Sup,” Thatch asks, the instilled patience due to fatherhood evident.

“Did you know Whitney tooks to me camp for the first time. Was my favorite time.” He looks over at me with an unguarded smile as that weekend replays in my head. It was three weeks before we broke up. Smore’s, reading books by firelight, disastrous fishing, fighting bugs, swimming naked in the lake, playing cards, making crazy love under the stars. My favorite part? The feeling of solidarity between us on the drive home, hands clasped the entire ride. I was more confident in us than I’ve ever been as he looked over at me with adoration in his eyes. Warmth fills my chest as he looks back to Thatch, blue eyes imploring. “Did she tell you bout that?”

“No, man, I think I missed that story.”

Eli’s expression falters. “She taught me how to feesh tat weekend. The only thing I caught was my thumb.” He chuckles and wiggles the thumb on the hand wrapped around Thatch’s collar to inspect it. “I didn’t know how ta dostuff like that back then, no time.”

I frown at his confession as my heart bleeds with his next one.

“She’s mad at me cause I wasn’t a good boyfriend to her, Thatch,” He shakes his head sadly. “I never danced with her. All she wanted was one slow dance, and I lef the bar cause I had a xxiety attack,” he lowers his voice as Thatch hoists him up, and

my heart physically cracks at that admission. I was a total bitch that night. “I didn’t know how to dance, never,” he slurs, “until Evie taught me.”

Jealousy snakes its way in, intertwining with the growing ache in my chest. “She’s my best girlfriend. I can dance now,” he confesses in a whisper I believe he thinks only Thatch can hear as I duck beneath his other shoulder and wrap his arm around me. “But she doesn’t want to dance with me no more, Thatch.”

Thatch looks over to me, and I avert my gaze as we walk Eli into the den and manage to deposit him on his back on the mattress. Turning to go, Eli grips my hand, wordlessly urging me to stay. I can barely make out his profile in the dark room as Thatch lingers uncomfortably next to us before speaking up. “I’ll go grab him a water and a few ibuprofen.”

“Good idea,” I nod as I stare back at Eli, who gazes up at me with unguarded affection. “Wasn’t all bad...Bee...,” he whispers his pet name for me, a name I never thought I would hear again, and I shake my head in agreement. But it’s the longing in his voice that has my heart seizing. “Remember...me? I can’t forget you.”

Unable to help myself, I push the lock of hair back from his forehead and nod. A faint smile graces his lips as Thatch comes back armed with a water bottle and two tablets. Thankfully without protest, Eli takes them before guzzling the water.

“That should help ease the sting a little. Get some sleep, man,” Thatch says. “See you in the morning.”

Eli nods slowly, his eyes drifting to me as he fights to keep them open, blinking a few times before losing the battle when they flutter closed.

For several minutes, I gaze on at him as he lays completely still and drink in his long muscular frame, the rapid rise and fall of his chest, the perfection of his chiseled face covered in stubble and shadow—the thickness of his lips.

“Of course, I remember,” I whisper. “You were pretty fucking unforgettable yourself,” I murmur, all too tempted to press a kiss to his parted lips, “how could I forget my first love?”

Leaving him comatose, I pause beneath the doorway before stepping out of the darkened room and into the kitchen to find

Thatch waiting for me.

“Whitney—”

“I know,” I say, rewrapping the cheeseball, my appetite gone as Eli’s latest confessions swirl around in my head.

“I feel for him,” Thatch says as I put the ball back in the fridge and grab a sponge to wipe the counter to escape his scrutiny.

“I know, but it’s been seventeen fucking years, Thatch.”

“From where I’m standing, that doesn’t at all matter. He’s trying *so hard*, Whit. Isn’t that worth something?” It’s hard to gauge whether he’s talking about himself or Eli, probably both, but I have no doubt his empathy stems from his current situation.

“I know.”

“People *can change*, sis. Hell, look at the mess I was when I met your sister.”

Tossing the sponge into the sink, I turn to him. “I hear you, but you do know she loved you as you were. That’s who she fell for.”

He dips his chin and averts his own gaze to dismiss the subject. As close as we are, I know Serena’s off-limits tonight. With my own head whirring, it’s easy to let it slide. “So, you’re going to talk to him?”

I nod. “Yeah, I am.”

“Good.” He chuckles. “I’d say he’s earned it. What in the hell does Mom put in that eggnog?”

I shake my head and glance back in the direction of the den. “No idea.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Waking abruptly, head throbbing, I realize I'm fully dressed—images of how I got to the mattress shudder in. But anything prior to that is still a bit fuzzy, though I know I cornered Whitney last night and no doubt gave her a dose of verbal vomit. Softly closing the bathroom door behind me, I relieve myself, wash my hands and look in the mirror as small pieces come back to me. I came onto her again, aggressively. The glaring vanity lights of the bathroom have me wincing as I try desperately to recall the conversation.

Did I say I would fuck her with a carrot?

What in the hell was in that eggnog?

“Jesus Christ, Welch.” Palming my head, humiliation coats me as the reminder of why I don't drink throbs at my temple and continues pulsating to the back of my head. I splash cold water on my face wondering what time it is while seriously considering making a running leap off the nearest cliff.

Once again, I've made a fool of myself vying for attention. Even with the conversation fuzzy, it's evident I didn't make progress that way.

She knows I'm not a drinker and even tried to spare me, so any razzing will be deserved. If anything, I hope she had a good

laugh at my expense. Especially if what I confessed was as poorly executed as I imagine it would be by a man who hasn't had a drink in two decades after consuming the devil's juice.

Back in the den, I step onto the deck and into the freezing night, staring up at the starless sky, my dearest old friend nowhere in sight. Even the moon is hiding from the disaster that is me at the moment.

Closing my eyes, I remember faint whispers in the darkened room, a flash of her sitting next to me on the bed. Her whispers or mine? Who fucking knows. Even as the man I've grown into, I've always been my most vulnerable with Whitney. It's always been that way, hasn't changed, and apparently won't. The crazy part is, she was purposefully kept unaware of how vulnerable I was.

My design.

She could have me feeling both exposed and invincible within the same minute, fuck, the same *breath*. That was what she drew from within me then.

I was close to in love with her before I even kissed her. Was already there and fell impossibly deeper the first time I sank inside and lost myself, escaping grief and the sharp-edged reality that haunted me nearly every waking hour.

“Thank you for today,” I murmur before we exchange another agonizing and lengthy kiss goodnight at the door of her apartment. She drops the bags in her hands to wrap around me. Bags she acquired in a last-minute Christmas shopping trip I agreed to suffer through only for the chance to spend more time with her before she went home for Christmas break.

She's been on the forefront of my mind all day, even more so than usual because I woke this morning to the smell and sight of a fully decorated, brightly lit, four-foot Christmas tree at the foot of my bed. A Christmas gift from her, which had my chest swelling with unbearable ache.

No other human being in my life has taken such care to lift me up the way she has. I'm certain she counts my smiles, which are becoming easier to grant. She's not only cracked my shell, but inch by inch, she's dragging me out of it. Waking up next to her

immediately starts a more positive mindset, making my days so much easier, so much better.

It's damned near impossible not to feed off her excitement and her enthusiasm for life, even as she's cooking something as simple as egg whites and bitching about Professor Morales. It's in her every pore, in her smile, in the energy she feeds me, to keep going, to keep moving, to fucking care beyond surviving another day.

Something I wasn't sure I could do. Something that's becoming a little easier as she pulls smiles from me, unexpected laughter, and an energy I no longer thought I was capable of.

I've spent the last two hours following her around an overcrowded department store, less concerned with the noise surrounding us and utterly dazed by her beauty. Entranced by her mouth as she speaks, captivated by her light brown eyes, the gracefulness of small gestures, the nape of her neck as she tied her hair up. The separation between our bodies became agonizing, and I relay as much as I kiss her. She whimpers into my mouth as I assault her with the strength of my need, my name sounding like a prayer as it leaves her lips.

Unwilling to release her, I dip and place soft kisses at the hollow of her throat as she fists my jacket, bringing me closer. Cock begging to be set free, I flick my tongue against the soft skin behind her ear before sucking, threading my fingers through her hair, trailing my lips along her jaw, teasing until she opens for me, accepting the long, thorough strokes of my tongue.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I run my tongue along her top lip, and in response she shudders in my arms. "Are you wet for me, Whitney?"

"Eli," she breathes in question, her lips whispering along my jaw as I stroke her hips beneath her jacket. "Come in? Alyssa's already left for home."

Without hesitation I nod, and she immediately dips, retrieving her purse and opening the door to her apartment. Grabbing her bags, I drop them onto the nearest surface the second we're on the other side of the door. In the next, she's in my arms again as I lift her, wrapping her legs around me and walking her to her bedroom.

She threads her fingers in my hair before clasping them around my neck, eyes glued to mine as she tugs at me urgently. Once inside her room, I lay her down on her mattress and start to unbutton her jacket. She stares up at me, her eyes pooling.

Expectation has me pausing briefly before I dip, slowly, so slowly drawing on her lips. Explosions detonate in my chest as I swipe my tongue along the seam to open, and she does. We sink into the mattress as I slide my tongue against hers, tasting and savoring until we're a tangled mess of arms and legs, chests bouncing with every desperate gasp of air. Pulling away just for a good look at her, she stares up at me in wait, her eyes imploring.

"Are we doing this?" I ask her, and she raises to her knees, unfastening my jeans, pulling them down past my boxers. She palms my cock, drawing a moan from me as I discard my jacket. I toe-off my boots and fist my thermal off, dropping it to the floor. When I'm in nothing but my boxers, she pulls me atop her and spreads her legs, locking me between them, her eyes filled with a mix of lust and affection. It's when I brace myself above her, feeding on the look in her eyes, that the last of my restraint leaves me.

With her silent permission, I slowly begin to undress her.

When she lays naked beneath me, I stall briefly, throat burning, heart hammering while memorizing every inch of her.

"I'm on the pill," she whispers as I go to reach for a condom. "I'm safe."

I nod, reveling in the idea of nothing between us as she dips her hand into my boxers, squeezing my cock before running it up and down the length.

I grit my teeth to keep from coming in her hands. It takes everything I have not to let her see the last of the unraveling inside me that began the second I laid eyes on her. Inching down to taste her, to ready her, she firmly shakes her head.

"Please, I'm ready. I need you so much."

"Bee," I murmur, discarding my boxers and sliding a hand down her silky, warm skin where I find her soaked.

"Ah," her back arches as I press my fingers into her and spread them. "Make love to me," she whispers as my chest

expands with her demand, a demand I refuse to deny her a second fucking longer.

Cupping the top of her head and lining us up, I exhale a shaky breath and slowly start to push inside her. It's then I lose the rest of my fucking mind. My entire body warming as fire licks up my spine, I press the rest of myself into her as tight, wet heat engulfs me. I'm just about to ask if she's okay as her lips part and a long moan escapes her.

"Feels so good, baby," I groan and close my eyes, trying to hold on as long as I can, my heart erupting in tiny explosions as I lift to stare down at her. She looks up at me as my heart dismantles completely, and I'm engulfed in sensation overload.

"Whitney..." I croak, coming apart as I feel her surround me wholly for the first time. "Jesus Christ, you're so fucking perfect. Nothing has ever felt so perfect." She lifts, sliding her tongue through my lips as all control leaves me, and I begin to roll my hips, seeking more and more. Staring down at her, my hair falls loose, and she pushes it back while gazing up in a way that changes me. It's then I give a piece of myself to Whitney Collins, and I'm certain there's no getting it back. Body arching, I grind myself into her, angling my cock along her G with every single thrust.

Unbelievably, she tightens around me in seconds, crying out to me as her body shudders and her warmth engulfs me. Balls soaked from her orgasm, I ramp up my thrusts and lose myself as she calls my name. Within the next breath, I'm overcome, a flood of euphoria rushing through me as my cock pulses. The orgasm cracks me in half as I drive in deeper, grinding my release into her, filling her while it consumes me. Breaths ragged, I all but collapse on top of her as she runs her hands through the damp hair at the back of my neck, gazing up at me. We don't utter a single word. We don't have to.

I see it then, she loves me, and I know she can see what I feel for her in the place we just created, a place where nothing else can reach us.

An unescapable truth occurs to me as we stare at each other, chests bouncing—I have not truly lived until this moment, being in love, with her.

That conviction was burned into me every single day we spent together after. Even the days we fought, days where my chest ached so fucking badly, I was only reminded of just how much she meant to me.

It was Whitney's absence that scarred me more than any other when we fell apart. I lost that warmth the second I let her go, and I've missed it since.

The kicker? I was to blame for all of it. Our beginning, my pursuit of her, our shaky middle, and untimely, fucked-up end. For not being able to get my shit together in time to embrace it, fully embrace *her*.

Stalking out to the yard, I curse my stupidity for thinking this would go any other way than with my rejection. That I was more than capable of seeing her—maybe reminiscing—and offering her my apology and explanation. The sheer stupidity that I have outlived the relationship that stole a large piece of my soul and kickstarted my life.

I might have convinced myself I came out of selfish curiosity to deliver an overdue apology, but that's no longer the case at all. I find myself in the same position I was in the second I let her go—filled with longing and soul-crushing regret.

The more I spend time here, observing her with her family, discovering the extent of what I gave up—gave away—the more I know it wasn't just curiosity that brought me here. It was justification for the real truth.

I still want her.

It's as complicated and as simple as this—after nearly a lifetime apart, I don't just want her. I want her *back*.

Deep down, somehow, I knew I would still feel for her no matter who she became. But to feel it to *this extent*?

Clearly, I'm alone in it. Whatever lingering feelings or attraction she may have for me at this point, it's not enough, not for her.

Even so, I came intent on telling her the truth, which I will. But the foolish notion my head and heart decided on the minute I saw her mere days ago is just that—*foolish*. She's rejected our

past, and me, repeatedly. A clear indication that a future would be laughably dismissed as well.

It's just too late.

Way too fucking late.

Disappointment cloaks me as I soak in the reality over the hopeful fiction I've been penning in my heart since we pulled up.

I hadn't fully realized just how much I've been holding onto the idea of us all these years, and now that I know, I have to let it go, let *her* go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



I wake at dawn and quickly bundle up in my robe while sliding into my elf slippers, a distinct chill in the air due to the absence of the fire. Once downstairs, I see I missed the start of Eli and Peyton's morning date as Peyton sips milk, nestled in Eli's lap in one of the recliners, the Lion King playing in the background on the big screen. Peyton graces me with an adorable flash of a smile while his teeth remain locked around the top of the cup.

"Morning, baby," I grin back. "Eli make you berry milk?"

"Mep," Peyton nods, his eyes flitting back to Simba as he sings "Hakuna Matata." Eli studies me briefly before darting his gaze away, his voice raspy as he speaks. "How did you sleep?"

"Really well, *you?*" I ask, gathering some of the wood next to the fireplace.

"Far from well," he says without a trace of humor. "I was going to start one. I just wanted to let him drink his milk first."

"It's fine. I've got a few fire-starting skills."

I feel his gaze on my profile as I position the wood around a starter log.

"Whitney," the timbre in his voice is arresting, and I glance over at him. "I'm sorry for last night. The way I acted was unforgivable."

I can't help my light laugh. "It's okay. I knew you were out of your mind drunk. To be fair, it was pretty entertaining." I shake my head. "You know, it's kind of funny. You've apologized more in the last few days than you did when we were together."

"Yeah, well, I don't plan on giving myself anymore of a reason to."

When I glance back at him, his eyes are on the screen, his fingers absently running through Peyton's fire-tinged hair. Ancient but familiar dread seeps into me as I decipher his expression.

Closed.

Ache fills my chest at the sight of it as a memory shudders in.

"Please come with me," I plead. "We can take advantage of the long weekend, and you need to get out of here. You've been holed up in this house all week."

"I already told you, I'm closing the sale of my parent's house. It's taken me too long to get rid of it." He stares through me from where he sits on his couch, his legs propped on a plush ottoman, a half-drained tumbler of neat whiskey in hand.

"But after you close, can't you join me in Nashville? I really want you to meet my parents. It's not that far of a drive."

He takes a long sip of his drink, his eyes glossy, distant.

"Look, if you're worried about the meet the parents' thing, they know we've only been dating for a little while. I mean, it's not like we're getting married. I just...would really love for you to meet them."

I glance at the bottle of whiskey that sits on a very expensive mahogany side table. When we first started dating, I was surprised to discover that Eli's house was lavishly furnished—something I overlooked at the party. A house that, for the most part, remains spotless despite the fact he has three self-absorbed, fuckboy roommates who are nothing like him. But it's to be expected. Eli needs order, routine, and he sticks with it no matter what. Even in the worst weather, he gets his ridiculously long runs in, studies a set number of hours every night, and has made it his personal mission to read a book a day.

He's a far cry from all of the other guys I've dated, even though his inability to switch things up grates on me at times. Since we've been together, though, I have to admit his influence has rubbed off substantially. I can run two miles with him now without collapsing. I'm eating cleaner, and my grades are improving. I get more sleep and nurse a lot fewer hangovers—mostly due to his aversion to crowds and parties.

When I climb into his lap, he hesitates before pulling his legs from the ottoman to accommodate me, his posture tensing. He doesn't bat me off, but he might as well have with the reception he's giving me. It still surprises me how easily he can ice me out at times with as close as we've gotten. I've learned, though, that with Eli, patience is not only a virtue but greatly rewarded.

"I just want them to see how wonderful you are," I eye the drink in his hand along with his scowl. "When you're in a decent mood."

"I'll never understand why this is so fucking appealing," he says absently, staring into the amber liquid.

"Then don't do it." I slide my hand around his neck, running my fingers through his feather-soft hair. "I would rather you not."

"Yeah, well, you don't really have a fucking say in that, do you?"

I rear back as he flicks his cold stone gaze to me.

Standing, I grab my flip-flops and start sliding into them. "I don't know what's wrong with you, but if you won't talk to me about it, I can't help."

"So, you're my problem solver, too?"

"You can be a real dick. You know that?"

"Are you planning on telling me how to hold it while I take a piss as well?"

I scrutinize him.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

“Don’t play ignorant. It’s painfully clear you’re purposefully trying to push me away. If you want to end it, have the fucking balls to end it.” I shake my head, growing furious by the second. “Matter of fact, I take the invitation back. I just wanted to get you out of here, try to jostle you out of the shitty mood you’ve been in, and have a bit of fun.”

“I’m afraid our versions of fun are entirely different,” he delivers dryly.

“Oh,” I scoff. “I’m well aware.”

“You knew this about me,” he says icily, “don’t act so surprised.”

“No chance of surprise with you, is there?”

His eyes cut me, and I instantly regret my words.

“Eli—”

“Maybe I’m boring, Whitney. Maybe I’m just not the fun fucking guy, okay? So, do me a favor and stop painting me as the villain every time I turn down an invitation.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I say, taken aback by his easily delivered venom. “If you’re resenting me this much right now, maybe we should take a weekend apart because I really don’t like this color on you.”

Swallowing repeatedly, I gaze down at him, searching for any sign of the Eli I’ve fallen in love with as his jaw ticks.

“I’m going to go.”

He slams his tumbler onto the coffee table, the liquor swishing over the side. “Fuck that, come here.”

“No. I don’t think so.” I gather my purse. “It’s one thing to be in a bad mood, another entirely to treat me like it’s my fault and take it out on me. I won’t be a punching bag, Eli. No matter how much I care about you.”

“Come here, Whitney,” his voice is hoarse, a mix of frustration and melancholy.

“I’m going to Nashville. Give me a call when you manage to tuck Mr. Hyde away, and maybe I’ll answer. Have a good weekend, asshole.”

He stands abruptly, “Whitney—”

I shake my head and manage to keep my tears at bay but can't keep the shake out of my voice. “I don't know or want to know this version of you.”

“I'm done.”

“Okay,” Biting my lip to stifle a threatening sob, I turn toward the door.

“I mean, I'm done drinking. Not with you.”

“I'm not sure you mean that.”

He smacks the door closed with his palm as I open it and flicks my purse strap from my shoulder like it's a nuisance while crowding me.

“Bee,” he says softly, turning me to face him, “don't go.” The remorse in his tone has my heart aching as he presses his forehead to my shoulder. “I'm sorry. It's just...”

“Just what?”

“I don't want to weigh you down with my shit or hold you back from doing the things you want.”

“You haven't, and I wouldn't let you.”

“You missed spring break with Alyssa.”

“Because I've been there done that, and I have another one next year. I wanted to spend it with you.”

“I don't know if I can be what you need.”

“I'm not a prisoner, Eli, and I'm not standing here because I want something different. I'm standing here because I want what I've got. At least what I think I've got.”

“You've got me,” he murmurs before slowly kneeling and lifting the hem of my tank, exposing an inch of skin before running his tongue along it.

“Please tell me what's wrong,” I murmur, running my fingers through his thick hair as he attempts to distract me with his wicked mouth. “Y-you've been acting like this all week. I try to touch you, and you refuse to let me.”

His eyes flick up at me as he glides his tongue seductively along the hem of my shorts, leaving a trail of goosebumps. I repeat his name softly as he stares up at me, evident struggle in his tumultuous gaze. He's fighting something I can't at all identify.

"Tell me," he whispers hoarsely, "tell me what you see in me, Whitney." He runs his palms up and down my hips, his eyes intent as he studies his movement before encasing me in his hold and pressing his forehead into my stomach. Sighing, I grip his jaw and tilt his head up.

"Up until a few minutes ago, I saw an intelligent, good-natured, strong, confident, beautiful, well-mannered gentlemen who has his shit together, who challenges me, who brings out the best in me, and who makes me happy. Eli...Just talk to me. You're not sleeping well, y-you're barely eating, and you're working out like you're about to compete in Iron Man. I know you're hurting, or something's bothering you. You can trust me. You can tell me anything."

Lost in his thoughts and unsure if he truly heard my words, he tugs my shorts and panties down, and they fall to my ankles.

"I do want you to touch me," he confesses with an edge to his voice. "I always want to touch you."

"Eli, you're upset, we should talk—"

"Let me," he says hoarsely, emotion shining in his eyes. "Let me make it up to you." He slides his finger through my wetness, and I close my eyes, gasping as he begins to explore. Intent on his task, I stand in wait, my heart in my throat, blood pulsing through me as his touch electrifies me.

"Fuck," he murmurs before pulling me into his arms and depositing me on his ottoman. In the next breath, my tank is discarded, and I'm lying naked beneath him, utterly at his mercy. Warm palms spread my thighs as he gazes at my exposed flesh from where he kneels on the floor. Biting his lip, his icy blue eyes flick to mine as he pushes a finger into me, and my back bows.

"So beautiful." He dips and licks me smoothly before jackhammering his tongue along my clit. Body shuddering, I grip onto the felt of the ottoman as he lazily explores me, the torturous foreplay his typical MO. The night we first got intimate months

ago and the weeks after where we spent long hours in bed getting our bodies acquainted seems like a lifetime ago because of the sporadic distances he's put between us since. Without warning, we can go from inferno hot to ice-cold—the sudden change in temperature baffling and bewildering me. In the last week, he's exasperated my patience, refusing my sexual advances, his reasoning vague.

“I'm sorry,” he rasps out, gliding his finger in and out of me as I writhe beneath him. “You're the only thing that makes it bearable,” his apology is chalky, filled with remorse as he adds another finger and expertly works them inside me.

“Eli,” I murmur, his words confusing, his touch consuming. He dips, pulling my clit into his mouth and sucking lightly. My thighs shake around his head as a whisper of a smirk graces his lips before he dips again.

Lick, thrust, suck.

Lick, thrust, suck.

Just as my orgasm starts to build, he lowers a finger tracing my back entrance, and brings heated eyes up to mine. “I want this too.”

My eyes widen, and with a devilish twist to his lips, he slowly presses a finger in. I cry out in surprise, the foreign sensation pushing me right to the edge. “Not quite the gentlemen now, am I?”

All words die on my lips as I allow my moans to speak for me.

Lick, thrust, suck.

Filled with him, consumed by his wicked touch, I begin shuddering as he summons the orgasm from me, spreading me wider, his eyes blazing a trail from his working fingers up to mine.

“This pussy is fitted just for me,” he declares before pulling hard on my clit. “Perfectly mine,” he murmurs, twisting his fingers before running the tips of them along my G in beckoning. I detonate as the wave zings through me, and he increases his pace. Fast breaths pump out of me as I twitch with aftershock while he continues to feed, intent on more until I grip his hair in an effort for connection.

“Eli, baby, please look at me.”

When he lifts his tortured clear blue gaze to mine, I see nothing but conflict as fear eats the rest of his expression. Lifting, I capture his lips and protectively wrap my hands around his neck.

“I want you,” I murmur into his mouth, sliding my hand between us, and he stops me, encircling my wrist and shaking his head.

“Not tonight, okay? I’m just...”

“It’s okay,” I concede. “It’s okay.”

“Just a bad week,” he swears.

I run my fingers along his jaw. “I’m sorry you had a bad week.”

“Jesus, Whitney,” he buries his face in my neck. “I’m fucking failing at deserving you.”

“Then be a nicer boyfriend,” I say, partly in jest as he mumbles his response into my neck.

“I’m trying.”

“Please, Eli, come home with me this weekend.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t.”

Wordlessly he lifts me into his arms and carries me to bed. Once there, he circles my waist and pulls me firmly into his chest, his heart beating erratically against my back. Clear unrest emanates from his frame as he holds me tightly to him. Every part of me wants to turn in his arms and demand an explanation and the reasoning behind his behavior, but I don’t. As much as I want to demand it—even more so, I want his admissions given freely, in his own time. That’s where the patience comes in—and therein lies my hope that it will pay off—because, for me, he’s worth it.

Grabbing the box of matches, I mull over how I felt on the drive to Nashville that night, alone and wrapped in a state of confusion that remained a constant in our last months together and long after we broke up. That night was the last night Eli was openly emotional in front of me. For the most part, he was an amazing boyfriend—until Hyde came out. Though Hyde’s appearances were rare, when he reared his ugly head, Eli would

distance himself to keep me from dealing with the worst of it. Whatever battles he faced, he insisted on fighting alone, which he knew hurt me.

Showing up with soup when he was sick or anything that displayed any sort of maternal concern—that included me caring for him—seemed to push him away. It was the tiny fractures like that which caused wear and tear on our relationship. It was as if he didn't want me to see any weakness in him at all. The only time he let me see true vulnerability was in bed.

In those intimate moments, his heart was open, unguarded, and it seemed he couldn't stop it when we were connected that way. Sex was *emotional* for Eli, which made him a rare breed and only endeared him further to me. It was the distance he put between us that ripped us apart and his purposeful indifference between those rare, tender moments that kept us from reaching our full potential.

The same indifference he's displaying now as he retreats inside himself, which is what I've been waiting for.

The other fucking shoe.

Proof and confirmation that I didn't imagine the scenarios where I took a step forward, and he inched away from me.

Mere days are all it took.

I shouldn't be surprised, but the sincerity he's displayed since he got here almost had me convinced. I was believing again.

I allow myself to absorb the fresh sting as a reminder while I pull a match from the box. This is what Eli does. What he's always done, and who he is.

The only relationship stamina Eli Welch ever had was in the bedroom. It kills me that I even considered giving him a chance for a real conversation. Resignation takes over as I strike the match, drop it, and walk away.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“I’m here,” I chirp at my mother, where she stands in the kitchen, sounding off a list of ingredients to Eli as he types them into his phone.

“What’s going on?” I ask. Eli doesn’t so much as glance my way as I look between them.

“Stealth mission,” Mom pipes tracing one of Grammy P’s recipe cards with her finger, “and I’m sending my strongest troops.”

Deflating at the idea of spending more time trapped in the car with Eli, I woman up and nod as Serena prances into the kitchen with Thatch on her heels.

“Mom, it’s just a trip to the grocery store,” Serena admonishes. “Whit and I can handle it.”

Mom looks between us, brows rising. “Can either of you change a tire?”

“No, but I can dial Triple-A,” I sass.

“Well, with these two coming, you won’t have to.”

“I’ll go get Peyton,” Serena says.

“No, your father has whisked him away. They’re busy. Conner and Gracie are stringing popcorn. This is an adult-only

trip. In and out, the store is probably a madhouse today.” She turns to Eli. “And toothpicks,” Mom adds. “Got all that, handsome?”

Eli grins, clearly fond of his nickname. “Got it.” He pockets his cell in his dark-washed jeans as I try not to notice his impeccable dress.

“Good.” Mom nods. “Shop smart, kids. Last chance.”

“On it,” I say, as the four of us head toward the front door gathering our coats from the hall tree as Brenden speaks up from the recliner.

“You guys mind picking up diapers for Wyatt?” Brenden stands and opens his wallet, and Eli shakes his head. “I’ve got it man.”

“Thanks,” Brenden says, reclaiming his seat and picking up the remote.

“You *could* help Mom, asshat,” Serena snaps. “You haven’t lifted a damn finger since you’ve been here.”

“It’s called Christmas *vacation*,” Brenden defends indignantly as Thatch hisses Serena’s name in warning.

“He’s as lazy as the days are long,” Serena declares, her eyes zero in on Erin, who sits on the couch feeding Wyatt a bottle. “I don’t know how you put up with it. I feel sorry for you, sister,” she adds before stalking out the front door.

“Great,” I mutter, knowing something must have triggered Serena in the last hour as we all haul ourselves out the door. Thatch unlocks their idling SUV as we all pile in, the cabin already warm due to Thatch’s consideration. Serena has no idea how lucky she is to have someone willing to brave the cold to ensure she’s warm—to open the impossible pickle jar, carry the bulk of the heavy load. Little things men do to care for their women. Things that are taken for granted over time by those in a relationship. Things that make a single girl envious. I guarantee a week without Thatch would remind Serena just how much she relies on him—of how those little things add up. In truth, it goes both ways, and Thatch would be just as lost without her.

Eli and I stare out of our respective windows for the first few minutes of the drive—which would be fine if Serena and Thatch

were speaking to fill the void. Eli pulls out his cell and begins typing away on his phone, grinning when a return text message comes in. He hasn't so much as looked at me since our run-in this morning. It seems I don't exist for the moment—which I decided this morning was for the best. Instead of mulling over the ancient dead horse, I try to thaw some of the inch-thick ice between Thatch and Serena.

“How are things at work, Thatch?”

“The usual. Nothing interesting. Got a long list of projects lined up next spring, but I can't say I'm not happy about the downtime.”

“That's so awesome. I'm proud of you.”

His grin is genuine. “Thanks, sis.”

One day, hopefully in the not-so-distant future, I plan on charging my brother-in-law with the task of building my dream home.

“What about you, sis? How's the admin side going?”

“A nightmare this past month,” she relays quickly. “It's like he's forgotten everything I taught him.”

Thatch glares at the side of her head as my stomach sinks. More deafening silence ensues as I glance over at Eli when his phone pings.

“Hot date?” I loathe the drip of sarcasm in my tone.

Oh, come on, Whitney!

“Not my type.”

“Oh yeah, why's that?”

“Married with two kids,” he replies, briefly darting his eyes to me.

“What is your type, Eli?” Serena asks.

Eli closes out his screen and pockets his phone. “Not sure. These days, I'm too busy to put much thought into it.”

“Yeah, I can see that about you,” Serena answers dryly.

“Do you have any limitations today?” Thatch scolds her. “Is *anyone* safe?”

“I just asked a question,” Serena defends innocently.

“With the same bitchy tone.”

“Fine, I’ll shut up.” Serena crosses her arms, glaring out of the windshield.

“Come on, guys,” I project my voice and nod toward Eli. “We’ve got company.”

“Sorry, man,” Thatch apologizes as Eli glares at the side of my head.

“I’m fine,” Eli assures, “Don’t worry about me.”

“Actually, he’s just the type to get extremely nervous in domestic situations such as these. It’s a miracle he’s made it this long and hasn’t Shawshanked his way out, tunneling himself into the mountains.”

“Hey,” he whispers venomously, and I turn to face him. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” I shrug. “It’s the truth. When things get sticky, you bail.”

His jaw ticks as his stare hardens immeasurably.

“Jesus, sis, don’t mimic bad behavior,” Thatch says in Eli’s defense.

“I’m not, and it doesn’t compare. We aren’t a couple,” I declare.

“Could have fooled the eleven other people you’re rooming with,” Thatch spouts, eyeing me pointedly. He lifts a brow as I narrow my eyes at him before averting his back to the road. Just as he does, we hydroplane on a patch of ice.

“Shit,” Thatch says, attempting to correct the wheel as Serena freaks, gripping the ‘oh shit’ handle while barking at Thatch.

“That’s not helping,” I snap at Serena as Thatch recovers control of the car, again shooting a glare in Serena’s direction before focusing back on the road.

So, *this* is hell.



Once at the superstore, we decided it was best to divide and conquer. Eli texted us each a part of the list, and wordlessly, we all separated, grabbing a cart. Determined not to let the glare Eli torpedoed my way screw with my mojo, I hum along to the music playing over the loudspeakers. I sidestep a man minding a cart with a screaming toddler—he glances over at me as I pass, expression screaming, “help me,” as his wife sorts through a pajama rack. As expected, mere days before Christmas, the store is in utter and complete chaos as people zoom through aisles as if they’re in racing lanes—their expressions filled with panic. Desperation leaks from others who stand side by side frantically sorting through sale bins, occasionally glancing over at each other with scathing side-eyes.

In other words, it looks a lot like Christmas.

Nothing new. Just humanity taking another solid hit during a time we’re supposed to be praying for peace on earth while wishing goodwill toward our fellow men.

With my portion of Mom’s list fulfilled and confident I’ve done my own Christmas shopping justice, I breeze through the aisles as one-woman mouths “bitch” to the back of another after she purposely snatched a stocking stuffer she was reaching for from a shelf.

It’s times like these, being in advertising, that I feel a little guilt for playing my part in convincing the masses that they need a certain item in their life.

Still, I highly doubt I would ever compete for a toy to the point of arrest or find myself in a fight in the aisle of a superstore for any reason.

A red-faced woman flies by me, repeating a list under her breath as I start to pass another aisle. I do a double-take when I spot Eli looking dumbfounded in the baby section, staring at an intimidating wall of diapers. He stands perplexed, his eyes volleying from the shelf to his cell phone. It’s then I know he’s

debating on sending a message to Brenden like it would be as ego-shattering as asking for directions.

Men.

Without much thought, I snatch Wyatt's diaper size and brand off the shelf and chuck it in his cart as I walk by.

"I see you're still too proud to ask for help," I toss over my shoulder, wheeling past him. A mere second later, I'm struck in the back, the bag of diapers bouncing a foot away from me. Gaping, I look back to see Eli's nostrils flared, his fists clenching at his sides as if he's preparing for battle.

"You did *not* just throw diapers at me."

"Yeah, I did," he fires back, "and who the hell wants to ask for help from a smug asshole?"

"You did not just call me an asshole."

"If the *anus fits*," he quips, grabbing the exact same size and brand from the shelf and tossing them in his cart before turning to wheel off in the opposite direction.

"Hey, hey!" I glance around the aisle, thankful we're alone, as I charge toward him. "What the hell is your problem?"

"*My problem?* You can't be serious."

"Since you just assaulted me with Pampers, yeah, I want to know what your damage is." He doesn't hesitate, charging towards me until he's again in my personal space. He's even more beautiful when he's furious, his gaze deadly as his shoulders rise steadily toward his ears.

"Like you don't know you just exploited a weakness of mine in that SUV in order to get a nasty dig in?"

"And you haven't done the same thing to me? Showering me with sweet words and apologies, catering to me all the while playing sincere before—"

A nosey passerby eyes us both, and I cut myself off as Eli leans in, undeterred.

"Not with ill intent. There was nothing contrived about it. I've been nothing but honest with you."

"Yeah, only to ice me out this morning."

He steps forward and cages me into a shelf of formula. “Make up your fucking mind.”

“Pardon?”

“You’ve done nothing but *ice me out* since I got here, so make up your mind. You either want my attention, or you fucking don’t. I’m sick of repeating myself, but please refer to our previous conversations if you’re unsure of my intentions—or reason for being here. I’ve made myself clear. You, however, have been looking at me like you want to eat me while telling me to stay away from you.”

“I have not.”

“So, I’m imagining it?” He scoffs. “You haven’t thrown a single signal my way?”

“You’re so fucking arrogant.”

“Confident.”

“Arrogant. You assumed that just because there is attraction, there is possibility.”

He presses in, his *everything* close. “If I was in it for something *physical*,” his eyes dip, “I could have *fucked* you already.”

My jaw drops. “You’re disgusting.”

“Well, you aren’t so appealing yourself at the moment.”

“How dare you!”

“Yeah, how dare I read into the come fuck me eyes, the goosebumps, the parted lips, the fast breaths, and hard nipples.”

Instinctively, my hands fly up to my chest. “My nipples are not hard for you!”

“Jesus,” he rips at his hair before pushing his fingers through. “Don’t worry. I’m backing off for no other reason than self-preservation. Somehow, in all my recollection, I’d forgotten what a nightmare you can be if I’m not reading your every thought and interpreting it correctly. Message received, Whitney. I’ll be packed and ready to roll out the second the presents are unwrapped.”

“Great fucking idea. Let me know if you need help!” I snap, wheeling alongside him as we race side by side to reach the end of the aisle.

“You go left,” he barks.

“Fine.”

I go right, and we collide. I nearly go down by the sheer force of the collision, and in an instant, his arms are righting me. Just as suddenly, he releases me and takes a hard left, stalking off as I yell after him.

“You could not have effed me already! *You pig!*”

“*Ape,*” he barks over his shoulder, “get it straight.”

“Oh, no, ape would give you far too much intellectual credit!” I scream out as a woman quickly wheels past me, throwing a protective arm around the child speed walking next to her. Eli flips me the bird before stopping at a cardboard Santa endcap, snatching a bag of stuffed Oreos from his mittened hands, ripping them open, and shoving one in his mouth before disappearing around the corner.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Ripping off a piece of jerky from the stick, I toss another emotionally induced last-minute present into my cart. I've made it my mission to gift my nieces and nephews everything I feel their little hearts may desire. Wandering down another toy aisle, I push aside the horrifying image of my next AmEx bill and am just about to reach for a rubber fish bath toy for Peyton when I spot Serena at the end of the aisle bent over her shopping cart.

Chuckling as I draw closer, my sarcastic greeting dies on my tongue when I see her frame shaking and realize she's silently sobbing. Rushing over, I cover as much of her as I can as I place a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Serena? Honey, what's wrong?"

I glance around, thankful we're alone for the moment as she reaches for me just as I pull her into my arms. "Sis? What's wrong?"

She clings to me, her cries stealing her ability to speak as I glide my palms down her back the same way Eli did for me. I ignore the sting that accompanies the thought. "Talk to me."

"I was j-just...s-shopping...and I started listening to this song. H-have you heard it?"

Tuning into the music drifting from the store speakers, it takes me only a second to identify it—"Coming Around Again"

by Carly Simon.

“Yeah, I love this song.”

“Have you ever listened to the w-words? I-it’s about m-marriage f-falling apart, and it’s true. It’s so fucking true,” she says, sniffing.

“That’s it,” I move to grab my cell. “Enough of this shit. I’m calling Thatch. You two have got to talk this out.”

“No!” She nearly knocks my phone out of my hand, and I pocket it and raise my palms in surrender. “Okay, okay, tell me what to do.”

“Nothing,” she sniffs as I do my best to wipe her tears while her eyes continually water.

“What happened before we left the house?”

“I t-ried to t-ake your advice. When I got out of the shower, I pulled on my sex p-panties and caught him alone while he was getting dressed,” she shakes her head, more tears gliding down her cheeks. “When I cornered him, he totally misread me and was all like, ‘What? Serena, Jesus, what *now*?’ L-like he dreads every word that’s coming out of my mouth. The saddest part is, he doesn’t even k-know he rejected me.” Her sobs come out harder as I cradle her tightly to me.

“Sis, you’re starting to scare me.”

“*I’m* so scared,” she sniffs. “Did you see the way he looked at me in the car? It was like I disgust him.”

“You took a nasty swing at him.”

“I know. It was petty, but you should have seen the way he looked at me after he blew up on Gracie, like it’s *my fault* she’s acting this way.” She shakes her head, “I don’t even think *he likes me* anymore.”

“Not true at all.”

“Am I *that* bad?”

“No. You aren’t. You have moments, but for the most part, you’re fun-loving and awesome to be around. Thatch gets to see the good, the bad, and the *ugly*, and right now, he’s focusing on the ugly.”

“I miss me. I mean, I miss the me I used to be before I was a wife and mother. I miss being an individual, you know? I wouldn’t even know what to do with myself if I had any freedom.”

“Maybe you miss parts of who you were, but that girl evolved. I *have* that freedom, and I’m telling you I don’t do much with it. It’s not exactly a luxury to be alone in life, Serena.”

“I can’t even get close enough to him right now to fight for him. I would give anything to have him look at me the way Eli is looking at you. He’s crazy about you, Whitney.”

I belt out a laugh. “Yeah, so crazy I drove him to drink last night, and right now, he’s stuffing his face with complex carbohydrates.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he just assaulted me with a pack of Pampers and told me he’s running for his life as soon as the holiday is over.” I shake my head. “It’s not important right now.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” she rolls her eyes.

“We’re not talking about me. I just found my sister sobbing into her shopping cart.”

“What am I going to do? I don’t want Gracie and Peyton feeling the animosity between us. I know they can sense it.” She blows out a teary breath. “This Christmas is going to shit.”

“No, it’s not. And you know what? We’re turning it around right fucking now. We’re going to finish this list, deliver the goods to Mom and cut ourselves off from anyone with a penis. Girl’s night starts the minute the dinner dishes are dry. We’ll drag Erin to the dark side if we have to. The boys can watch the kids so we can get some much-needed *sister time*.”

“God, that sounds good.”

“It’s so fucking on,” I declare as I usher us both down the aisle. “We just need a little purge and bitching session.”

Serena glances over at me, eyes lighting. “I love you.”

“You too. Let’s summon the boys and blow this joint.”



At Thatch's SUV, we finish unloading as the girls wheel up, three carts deep which are filled to the brim with stacked bags. Thatch's eyes widen as he looks over to Whitney, who refuses to even look at me.

Back to square one.

My mind screams 'fuck it' while the gnaw in my chest disagrees. It should have given me hope that she reacted that way after I decided to back off because, honestly, I thought it was what she wanted. Instead, I let *her bite* control *my bark*.

"Whitney, what the hell? This is insane," Thatch balks, stepping forward in an attempt to start unloading.

Whitney glances up. The junkyard dog crazed look in her eyes has Thatch and I both taking a step back as she delivers a threat. "You say another word, Thatch, and I'm buying all the children *puppies* for Christmas. A puppy for *each child*. Do you understand me?! A puppy for *each child!*"

I can't help my chuckle as I lean over to a wide-eyed Thatch. His Adam's apple bobs with his swallow. "I see she still impulse shops when she's pissed. She bought a ticket to Japan after we fought once."

"I got a refund," she counters while wrestling a plastic bag hitched on the lip of one of the shopping carts. When she finally rips it free, it explodes—the contents scattering on the pavement. I bend to help her collect a litter of cheap plastic toys. When I've retrieved a few, she snatches them from my hands. "I've got it!" I

lift my palms in surrender and watch her shove them into a new bag.

“Something happen in the store, sis?” Thatch asks, eyes widening in my direction.

Ignoring him, Whitney finishes unloading endless sacks of shit I can’t even begin to identify into the truck before unveiling a mini four-pack of wine, twisting off the top and downing one as she walks around the SUV to the passenger side. Knocking on the door ceremoniously, she delivers a bottle to Serena. “Drink your juice box, sis. The first speed round starts after dinner.”

“On it, thanks, *bro*,” Serena says as she clinks plastic bottles with Whitney.

“*To-night is your night, bro*,” Serena and Whitney sing-song together in some inside joke I can’t decipher.

“Oh, fuck,” Thatch mutters, terror in his tone over the whine of the electric motor as the hatch starts to close.

“What is happening here?” I watch on as Whitney nearly busts her ass after slipping on a small patch of ice. Flinching, I go to try and spare her from another fall just as she catches herself by gripping the door handle of the SUV. After sliding into her seat, she shoots Thatch and me a scathing side-eye and devilish smirk before tipping her bottle up while slamming herself inside.

From outside the car, we again hear them collectively belt out. “*To-night is your night, bro!*”

Thatch turns to me and shakes his head. “It’s from an old movie, “*Twins*,” Schwarzenegger and DeVito, and don’t ask me to explain it because I can’t. It’s weird sister shit, but... translation? It’s a war cry that means they’re going off-script... *rogue*, and it’s going to be a long fucking night.”



From the driver’s seat, Thatch eyes Serena with fear as she upturns her second wine. “This really isn’t the time, Serena. It’s a family holiday, not a girl’s trip to Cancun.”

“It’s whatever we want it to be, right, Whit?”

“Here, here,” Whitney chides, sipping her own second bottle.

“God knows you have no idea what fun means anymore,” Serena quips as I cringe, feeling the tension brewing. “My *King*,” she snorts.

Oh shit.

She must’ve taken Whitney’s advice, and it seems it didn’t go so well at all.

“What does that mean?” Thatch retorts warily. “And what the hell happened in that store to bring us to Defcon 1?”

Thatch helplessly eyes me in the rearview as I sink a little in my seat.

“Breakdown, aisle eight, Nerf guns,” Serena mutters dryly. “Don’t worry. *I’m over it*. By the way, *you’re* watching the kids tonight.”

“Whatever,” Thatch says, clearly irritated.

“Is that so much to ask? They are your children, too.”

“I said fine.”

“Actually, you said *whatever*,” she quips.

“Serena,” Whitney warns, glancing at me as I watch them volley back and forth.

“All right,” she sighs. “Fuck it.”

The silence in the cabin only adds to the tension as Thatch pulls up to the house and turns to Serena. “Screw that noise. I *know* how to have a good time. You’re the one who’s always the fucking buzzkill.”

Grenade pin pulled, Whitney immediately turns to me. “Get out of the car. *Right now*.”

Not needing a second warning, I fly out of my door and wait at the trunk for Thatch to release it as I watch Serena through the back windshield, her head seeming to turn in slow motion, Exorcist style, her voice muffled as she starts to read Thatch the riot act.

“Nope, Eli, forget the bags for now, this way,” Whitney instructs, motioning for me to join her as she heads behind the garage, safely out of the warpath. Not ten seconds later, Thatch

and Serena exit the SUV and charge through the side door of the garage, door slamming just before yelling ensues.

Whitney and I brave a peek around to see the back of the SUV open and shoot towards it before wordlessly starting to gather bags. We both pause as Serena's voice rings clear from the other side of the garage door.

"You want to know what happened? I heard a song about how marriage takes a toll as I was shopping and started crying in a fucking superstore because I related to it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Jesus Thatch, do you not know me *at all* anymore? Can't you see how bad it's gotten between us, how much we're growing apart, and how upset it's making me? Can't you read me at all?"

"I mean, I knew we weren't connecting lately, but I didn't realize you were this unhappy."

Whitney's posture deflates as she slows her efforts in gathering the bags. Physically, I feel the ache in her. It's when Serena starts to cry that Whitney hangs her head.

"I'm sorry. Tell me what to do," Thatch pleads. "Talk to me."

"I can't make you feel what you obviously *don't feel* for me anymore. I guess I just miss the man I married."

"The *boy* you married was an irresponsible pothead without two kids and a mortgage to pay. We used to fight about me taking more responsibility in case you've forgotten, and now you're saying I'm *too responsible*? I'm too boring? Jesus. I'm so lost."

"No, Thatch, no. It's not that. I...fucking miss you. I miss my best friend. I miss the man who could read my mood in mere seconds and actually gave a shit. It's like you can't stand me now."

"Whit," I say softly, my front flush to her back as she sniffs, "this is not for us to hear." She nods, and I coax her away from the SUV, several bags in both our hands as we leave the rest in the trunk. Wordlessly we walk around the cabin to the back porch. Whitney clears the steps and turns to stare at the mountain view, bags still in hand, confusion in her expression as if she doesn't know what to do.

I set my load down and eye the back door, thankful the curtain covering the glass door is closed.

“That was so stupid,” she croaks. “I didn’t mean to start a fight.”

“You didn’t,” I say, gently pulling the bags from her hands and placing them at her feet.

“As selfish as it is to say,” she whispers as she brings watering eyes to mine, “I don’t know what *I’ll do* if they don’t make it.”

“It’s just a fight.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve never seen her this way. And I’ve never heard him be so venomous with her. He’s losing his patience with her when she needs it most. They can’t break up. They can’t. There’s got to be something I can do. Maybe I can watch the kids so they can spend some time alone. Or—”

I tip her chin, cutting her off, so I have her full attention.

“When did their marriage become *your responsibility*?”

“What?”

“Matter of fact, let me ask you this. When did being the caregiver for this entire family become *your responsibility*? When did you decide everyone else’s well-being was on you, Whitney?”

She averts her gaze.

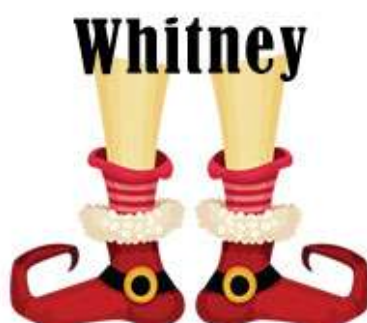
“Stop fucking looking away from me. I’ve watched you, *closely*, for the last four days, and you’ve done nothing but cater to them—*every single one of them*—even when they’re capable of fending for themselves.”

“I love taking care of them. It’s who I am.”

“No, it’s a selfless part of who you are, and there’s nothing wrong with it to a point, but you’re exhausted. How in the hell are you supposed to enjoy yourself—your own holiday—if you’re running around trying to please everyone?”

“And just what is it that you think I’m denying myself, huh? What is it that you think I’m miss—”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Eli places a palm on my chest, cutting my rant off before aggressively walking me backward. My feet move on their own accord due to the intent in his eyes as he bypasses the house before pushing me against it. Paralyzed by the blazing heat of his gaze, I gape at him as he flicks my jacket aside before gripping my hip, easily tugging my body forward to mold against his, our ragged breaths mingling.

“What are you missing? I think it’s *me*, and I think I’m missing *you*, and I think we’ve been missing *each other* for a long fucking time. Mistletoe,” he rasps out, a second before his lips crush mine.

My entire body jolts on contact as my eyes fly to his before fluttering closed. The strength behind his kiss shoots through me like lightning as he swipes his tongue along my lips, and immediately, I open. All outside noise disappears as he sweeps my mouth with an urgent tongue, and I moan onto it, body going lax against the house.

All I can do is feel as Eli fuses our mouths together, his tongue gliding along mine as I sink into him, my palms sliding up his muscled chest, his scent surrounding me, intoxicating me as he feasts.

A groan vibrates in his throat as he pins me further into the house, running his hard cock along my stomach as we explode into motion and touch, exploring, tasting.

Gripping the top of his jacket in my fists, I kiss him back furiously, our tongues dueling as he tilts his head, angling to go deeper. I feel every single bit of my restraint melt away with each sure swipe of his tongue. It's when he breaks our kiss far too soon that I realize how instantaneously I gave into him and how much of the truth he spoke back at the store.

He could have totally effed me.

“Jesus Christ, Bee,” he whispers, pressing his forehead against mine.

Stupid, stupid, twenty-year-old Whitney!

But I can't entirely blame her anymore. The truth is thirty-eight-year-old Whitney has done nothing but imagine touching him again and being with him intimately since his day one confession at the store. He inches away, studying my reaction to it, the act so intimate, so familiar, a ball forms in my throat.

Lips tingling, I stare up at him, praying some sort of self-preservation takes over as he palms the siding of the house, breaths coming fast.

“You can't just kiss me, Eli,” I whisper, my argument pathetically weak.

“I just did, and you kissed me back, and it felt fucking amazing.” There's not a trace of remorse in his expression. My gaze lowers to his mouth as he wets, then sucks his lower lip as if savoring my taste on his tongue. My entire body continues to thrum with need as he glances around to make sure we weren't seen. Thankful that's the case, and shaken to my core, I move to step around him, and he stops me with a firm grip on my hip, his thumb gently gliding along it.

“Don't,” he shakes his head. “Give me one minute. Sixty fucking seconds, Whitney.”

“To what?”

“To enjoy how good that kiss was before you try to convince yourself you lost some inner strength for taking part in it. Trust

me. It was a lot braver to let me kiss you than to cower away from it.”

My heart gallops as he lifts his hand and cups my face, running a thumb seductively along my lower lip before closing the space again and pressing another slow kiss to my parted lips. He drinks the remaining of his demanded seconds before pulling away, his eyes still closed. When he opens them, his expression hardens.

“What are you missing?” He says, resuming our argument. “Your *own life*.”

“Pfft, give me a break.”

“That’s what I’m asking you to give *yourself*. You fell apart in my arms the other night because you needed to. You can’t get back *to you* if you’re exhausting yourself worrying about everyone else.”

“Taking care of my family is *not* a chore for me.”

“It is if you’re already spread that thin.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re selfish. Have always been. Not that I expect you to understand this, but relationships take *work* and a hell of a lot of endurance. Thatch and Serena have been together nearly twenty years.”

“We’re not talking about them or me. We’re talking about *you*.”

“I’m fine.”

“Right. Okay,” he grits out. “Just more bullshit.”

“What exactly are you trying to do here?”

He gazes down at me, resolute. “Remind you that you’ve got your own shit to deal with at the moment and to stop being so hypocritical in thinking that Thatch and Serena are the only ones taking for granted what’s right in front of them.”

“So, what, *now* you’re a commitment man?”

“I’m the man that’s interested in you, who’s concerned about your well-being, who’s trying to remind you that at one point in time, your own fucking well-being mattered a hell of a lot to you as well.”

“It still does. I told you, it’s been—”

“A bad month, I heard that excuse.” He jerks his chin. “*Next.*”

“You’re such a smug bastard.”

“Maybe I am, and maybe I’m still a little selfish, but you haven’t changed much either—though I would like to see more of that fire back.”

“I haven’t lost it.”

His lips lift. “Getting there.”

“Stop it. You’ve observed me for *four* days. That doesn’t make you an expert.”

“Then help me,” he says softly.

“What?”

“Tell me what makes you tick these days, fucking talk to me. Tell me how to become an expert. I’ve approached this from every angle. Tell me how to get through to you.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Never been more so.”

“I’m not a problem to solve, and I’m not doing this with you.”

“Heard that bullshit too. You’re already doing this with me. If you’re not eye-fucking me, you’re silently relaying in some subtle way that you remember me—remember us. Or you’re leveling me with your mouth, or a single look, reminding me how much I hurt you. Trust me, you’re doing this with me and have been since the second I got here. You participated in that kiss, Whitney, and you want to be kissed again, right now. It’s written all over you. You’re just too afraid to admit it.”

“This is just convenient. You’re just—”

“Lonely...because it’s the holidays? I spent the last five Christmases alone and plenty before that. *Next.*” His stare zings through me. “Tell me to fuck off, tell me right now to fuck off *for good*, and I will. I was prepared to this morning, but when I tried to back off, it *hurt* you. It can’t hurt you if you don’t care. You do care.”

“There’s still an insane attraction between us after all these years and it’s not just physical. You can keep mouthing off your assumptions and whatever you want about my intentions, or you can let me come out and tell you one more time for *crystal clarity*. I came to *see you*. I came to apologize for hurting you because I wasn’t man enough to admit I wasn’t ready for what I saw in your eyes all those years ago.

“I’m standing here, kissing you and telling you the mistake I made then was not giving you words—words you needed to hear. I wasn’t capable then. I’m not the same guy you broke up with, and our breakup has a lot to do with why. I’m standing here, seventeen years later, because I never forgot you—and in discovering you again—I want to know you, I want to kiss you. I also want to fuck some sense back into the bitter whiner who’s eating up my thoughts and turning me into the same restless guy who can’t sleep because you’re close to me.”

His eyes drill me as his words pummel my chest.

“Love for your brother and all, but I’m not here to spend Christmas with *him*. I came here *for you*. As kamikaze as the idea might have been—hoping it was still there between us and for the possibility of a second chance—it’s apparent now it wasn’t so far-fetched. You still feel a lot for me, too, whether it’s nostalgia-based or not. So, don’t insult me by denying it another fucking minute.”

“You just expect me to—”

“Jesus, how the tables have turned.” He grips my face in his hands. “I already told you I expect *nothing*, and I sure as hell didn’t expect to feel so damned much so fast, but I should have known I would because it’s *you*,” he whispers, his eyes filled with affection. “I hoped...I hoped you weren’t so different that I couldn’t recognize you. I hoped for a lot, and now I’m simply *asking* you. I’m *asking* you to spend time with me, talk to me, to let me kiss you if you want to be kissed by me.” He swallows as he strokes me with reverent fingers. “I’m asking for another chance with you.”

All I can do is stare back at him.

“God, if you would only let me,” he lowers his hands around my neck and slides his thumbs along my throat. “I’m asking you

to think about *Whitney* and what *she wants and needs* because that's all I'm doing. Just think about it."

Releasing me, he disappears around the corner of the house. The sun sets as the timed lights click on. It's then I spot a lit plastic wreath adorned with mistletoe hanging from a hook on the siding next to me. The sliding door opens, and I hear the rustle of the bags as Eli gathers them before he steps in, my mother's greeting muffled as he closes the door. Utterly mystified, fingers numbing, I stare after him in the cold. But inside? I'm on fucking fire.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Pizza and plastic plates meant no dishes tonight, which also meant no one-on-one with Whitney. I had my say, and I've got nothing until she makes a decision and gives me some sort of a leg to stand on. Girl's night started the second those plates were trashed, and Thatch got to work making it a point to keep the kids upstairs. He built a gigantic fort in the media room to keep them entertained, which I helped with before retreating downstairs.

Stuck in limbo, I decided to chill out in the King's study, reading up about the man himself after plucking one of a dozen bios from the shelf.

From what I've read, Elvis Presley, a man arguably blessed with one of the greatest voices in music history—and gifted with the looks to match—committed a long, slow suicide.

Elvis didn't want me to know anything about him personally, and that I can relate to being a private man myself. I've never been an open book for anyone, not even Whitney. A personal issue I've fought hard to remedy over the years.

All Elvis wants from me is an appreciation for his music.

But in trying to keep his private life outside of my opinion of him, I fail because I can't look away from his personal life due to

the fact I have a real fucking problem with people who purposefully throw good health away.

Maybe it's because of my belief that the human body can turn in an instant, from temple to host—if not treated properly.

Laughter spills in just outside my window, interrupting my inner musings as I flip a page. Serena's laughter rings out the loudest, and I'm thankful for it. After their fight, Serena and Thatch entered the house looking exasperated and drained. At one point, Brenden had gone to talk to Thatch after noticing his defeated demeanor. With as much as I have gathered—by spying on the house in an attempt to gain traction with Whitney—I was tempted to follow to give him some behind-the-scenes insight but stayed back knowing I haven't earned a place in that conversation.

Since this afternoon, I've done nothing but think about the kiss we shared and Whitney's reaction to my words. I'm pissed at myself for having another reason to apologize to her, but fuck, that kiss. Feeling her needy moan in my mouth truly made the leap worth it. She was always so receptive to me, opening for me again and again like I was the thing she needed most. She did the same for me today, and I wanted nothing more than to add some stolen seconds to remind her *repeatedly*—in whatever way she would allow—of just how good we were and could be again...but it wasn't the time. I had to end that kiss before it went any further and find a better time. Time that seems impossible to locate in this atmosphere.

More cackling laughter cascades into my King suite as the girls' huddle in the loungers that sit just outside the den windows—louder pieces of their conversation drifting in. Unable to resist a second longer, I unlatch the lock and crack a window, holding my breath while hoping it goes unnoticed. I breathe easier as the conversation drifts in uninterrupted and decide I'm a bad man.

That I can live with for the moment.

“I swear to God,” Serena says, “if Thatch asks me ‘what's for dinner’ one more time, I'm going to lose my shit.”

“I know!” Erin chimes in, fluidly enthusiastic, no doubt due to booze consumption. “It's like the kiss of death. I can't stand it. I want to rip my hair out when Brenden asks me.”

“Oh, to go back to the beginning,” Serena sighs, “when I had no idea what he would say and waited on bated breath just to hear him talk—about anything and everything but the subject of fucking dinner. Thatch used to chat me up like crazy when we got together. Sometimes we’d fall asleep on the phone. I woke up one morning, and he was still on the line, waiting for me to wake up. That’s when I knew he was the one.”

A pause.

“When did you know Brenden was it for you, Erin?” Serena asks.

“You don’t want to hear it. He’s your brother.”

Whitney chimes in. “We can pretend like he’s a man for a few minutes. As long as it’s not too sexual.”

“It’s not,” Erin slurs. “It was at a company softball match. Believe it or not, your brother had one hell of a body years ago.”

“This is already testing my gag reflex,” Serena snarks.

“Hear me out,” Erin pleads. “So, he was shirtless, all solid muscle as he walked up to me all cocky, full of swagger.”

“More like piss and vinegar,” Serena quips.

“Shut it, Serena,” Whitney scolds in a slight slur.

“It was a slow-motion attack,” Erin recalls.

“Oh no, what did he do?!” Whitney asks.

“First the hand went up...sure and steady. He gripped the top of the hat so tight all I saw was muscle, forearm muscle, and veins,” Erin sighs.

“So, he knew what he was doing,” Whitney pipes in accusingly.

“Oh, he did, he knew,” Erin confirms, “It was obvious he had done it before...and I couldn’t help myself. I watched.”

“I think I know where this is going,” Whitney chirps.

“It was like magic...he just grinned at me, bit his lip, and slid that shit home.”

“Yep, yep. Gets me every time,” Whitney admonishes. “It’s voodoo is what it is.”

“I’m lost,” Serena interjects.

“He did the backward hat trick, didn’t he?” Whitney prompts.

Erin groans. “He so did.”

“Yeah,” Whitney says in a sympathetic tone. “It’s like Mac Daddy handbook rule #1. No woman is safe from that. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Oh no!” The lounge scrapes again. “We have to warn Gracie! We have to prepare her!” Whitney squeaks, clear panic in her voice.

“She’s nine, Whit.”

“Shit, we may already be too late.”

I shake my head as I hold in my chuckle.

“What is it about men? Why do we try so hard?” Erin asks.

“It’s chemical at first,” Whitney sighs, “and then sadly, the memory of the chemicals.”

The idea that she genuinely might believe that sends my gut churning.

“Who was your guy, Whitney?” Erin asks.

“The gorgeous man sleeping in our den.” Her words have me perking up as the low-lying fire flames in my chest.

“I thought he might be,” Erin says softly.

“He was gloriously naked the first time I laid eyes on him. I never had a chance.”

My grin only widens.

“He was naked?”

“Yeah, Alyssa got sick at a party at his house, and we crashed into his bathroom. He was in the shower.”

“Oh, my god,” Erin says with a giggle.

“The second our eyes met, instant chemistry.”

“I’ll bet. He’s pretty hot,” Erin says.

“Gorgeous,” Serena agrees. A pause. “Sorry, sis, but he is.”

“Yeah, well, he used it well. He tortured me for like a hundred dates before he kissed me. Strung me along for eight months before he shoved a knife into my heart while *facing* me. He didn’t even have the decency to let me turn my back on him.”

This admission has me swallowing, the guilt instant.

“What broke you up?”

“I don’t want to get into it. But he does.”

“He’s here. He’s right inside that door,” Erin urges softly. “Why don’t you go talk to him?”

I decide Erin wins the day, and it’s a given I’ll have her back when she needs it. Jury is still out on Serena, but I can’t fault her at all for her protective streak.

“I’m good here. If I get too close to him right now, it could be disastrous for me.” I don’t have time to decipher that statement before she speaks up again. “He told me he wanted another chance today after he kissed me.”

“What?!” They both shout simultaneously.

“And you’re just now telling me?” Serena scolds.

“Uh, sis, you were a bit busy War of the Roses-ing with Thatch.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“So, how was it?” Erin prompts.

“I can still feel it,” Whitney says softly. “I’m still spinning, and I don’t know if it’s good or bad.”

A dozen scenarios come to mind in the way to prove how good the idea is as I wrestle with myself on whether or not to shut the window.

“God, why can’t I forget that man’s chemicals?”

The ache in my chest intensifies as I fight the urge to go to her so we can cut through the red tape of our past. So we can hash our shit out before I demand that she be as honest with *me* as she’s being with her sisters. But I know that admission has to be earned. I’ve barely scratched the surface of my own.

“I miss that,” Erin says. “The firsts.”

“You and me both, sister,” Serena chimes in. “I can’t believe I broke down in a store today.”

I hear a shift of chairs again before Whitney speaks up.

“Do you know how I know you and Thatch are going to be ok?”

“How?” Serena asks tearfully.

“Because when I think about the prominent people in my life, the impact they have on me, their place, my priority list is very short. You, sister, are my one ride or die in life. I am one of the rare few who found a soulmate in a sister—as annoying as it is sometimes. But you, Serena, you were lucky enough to have found *two* soulmates, and honestly, I know their order. Thatch is first, and I’m the second.”

A pause.

“I know you love me, but Serena, *Thatch is first*, as he should be, and I’m okay with that. He deserves to be first. Hold onto him and hold on tight because he’s your sentence finisher. He’d not only bury the body for you, but he would make sure he took the fall. Thatch is that guy for you. Right now, it may be predictable, even a little boring, but you have the whole of the second half of your life to live. Can you even imagine trying to do it without him? Imagine waking up tomorrow, and his pillow is empty.”

“No. God, no. Stop right there.”

“There you go. That’s all the ammo you need to keep trying.”

“I want you to have that,” Serena says softly.

“I just told you I do—with you. And *you*,” Whitney adds, and I know she’s addressing Erin. “It’s like Charlotte says in *Sex and the City*—‘Maybe we can be each other’s soul mates. And then we can let men be these great nice guys to have fun with.’”

Swallowing, I feel the burn of argument in my chest and wonder if she’s so far gone in that belief that no man has a real chance at becoming more than fun for her. If so, that’s a far cry from the romantic I was involved with. I’m certain I had far more merit with her.

“Now,” Whitney says, “let’s turn this party around because it’s getting depressing.”

“Agreed,” Serena pipes. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

“Love you three,” Erin giggles.

“I’ll go grab us some more trouble to get into,” Whitney declares as I reach over and close the window praying like hell she can’t feel the chill already in the air when she steps in. Just after the sliding door opens, Whitney pokes her head around the thermal curtain, her golden eyes finding me. “Hey. Didn’t know you were in here.”

I’m going to hell.

“Yeah,” I say, lowering the book.

“You can sleep in my room if you want so we don’t bother you.”

“I’m good here.”

She wrinkles her nose. “We’re probably going to be going in and out *a lot*.”

“I’ll deal.”

“Okay, but the offer stands.”

“Thanks. I promise I’m good.”

She enters the kitchen and retrieves more wine before reappearing and pausing at the door. I feel her eyes on me and look up.

“Eli,” she whispers. “I’m sorry for acting like a jerk.”

“Which time?”

“Shut up,” she smiles and walks over, eyeing my biography. “Doing some studying?”

“Just trying to figure out what there is to admire about a guy who ate a stick of butter per sandwich.”

“Daddy loves them. I can make you one so you can test it out.”

“No thanks.”

She sits at my side on the mattress, the bed barely moving as she deposits the plastic bottles next to me. “Did you mean it?”

“Every word. Well, almost every word. I don’t know. I was mad.”

“You hit me with diapers,” she giggles, and I can’t help my grin.

“I’m not proud of it.”

We stare at each other, and I instantly feel the pull.

“I would apologize again, but I don’t regret that kiss, and I meant every word after it.”

“Eli, this is crazy. We really don’t even know each other anymore,” she says softly, combing my hair back. She’s buzzed, so I’m not sure she even realizes she’s doing it. Even so, it’s all I can do to keep from snatching her and pinning her beneath me.

“You’re still very much the same, Whitney, in the ways that matter. The same beautiful, selfless, mouthy, family-oriented pain in the ass who looks at me like...”

“Like what?” She asks, her eyes probing.

“Like only you can.”

She sighs, and I grip her hand. “You’ve been drinking.”

“So?”

“We can talk about this when you haven’t.”

“I’m not that buzzed. I’ll remember this conversation. I can hold my liquor, unlike you,” she pokes.

I can’t help my grin. “I don’t doubt it, but I rather we didn’t have it now.”

“You always did hate it when I drank.”

I sigh. “Because I was an asshole when *I drank*, but you were nothing like me.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

Positive she’s remembering a time where I hurt or alienated her due to my own issues, she moves to stand. I grip her wrist and pull her back to sit.

“You didn’t deserve it.”

“Deserve what?”

“The crap I gave you about your well-being. I really wasn’t trying to control you. That came from a place of fear.”

“I could tell. Though I really hated you for it sometimes, I could tell.”

“I just wanted you safe.”

“You acted the same when I flew off a cliff,” she laughs lightly.

“Can’t exactly blame me for that.”

“I don’t.” I run my fingers lightly through the space between hers.

“It wasn’t all bad, Eli. Not at all. We had something really special. I can’t deny it.”

I look up as she threads our fingers and squeezes.

“I don’t want to be bitter about any of it, but—”

“Seeing me again brought the painful parts back too.”

“Yeah, it did,” she nods.

“Same.”

She slowly shakes her head, and I can’t resist the draw. She’s sitting too close, smelling too good, looking too beautiful. Acting on it like the greedy bastard I am, I lean in and press a slow kiss to her lips. When I pull away, her eyes are pooling with need.

“Sorry, I just really wanted to do that in case you don’t give me another chance to.”

“Please stop doing that,” she sighs.

“Okay.” I swallow. “Is it because you don’t want me to?”

“No, it’s because I want you to way too much.”

Hope blooms in my chest. “You have my word that I won’t do it again unless you ask me to. But it won’t be easy.”

Her lips lift. “I remember when I had to beg for it.”

“That’s only because...” I falter, knowing that once we get into this, I won’t want to stop confessing.

“Because what?”

“I’ll tell you when you aren’t guzzling wine with your sisters.”

“Okay.” She nods toward the door. “I better get these to them before they start wondering where I am.”

“They know exactly where you are because they’re staring through the window.”

“What?” Whitney turns just as Erin and Serena duck out of sight, and a thud sounds on the porch, followed by an “oww, shit!”

“You bitches!” Whitney hollers and turns back to me, wide-eyed and grinning. “Did they see us kiss?”

“Yep,” I say without an ounce of shame. “I made sure of it.”

“You’re a real shit.”

“Worth it.”

She shakes her head as I pull her sleeves down and warm her hand between mine. “You should put gloves on.” I study her small hand against mine and feel her eyes on my profile.

“Why didn’t you marry, Eli?”

I look up.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. The one time I knew he was getting close to asking, I broke up with him. I knew I wouldn’t say yes. I felt terrible. You?”

“I’ve done a few long-term relationships but never once felt compelled to propose. The closest I got to something real was with my friend Evie. She knew early on we weren’t going to get there, so she ended it. Instead, we became the best of friends. I was the best man at her wedding.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah. She knows about you.”

She gives me a faint smile before we share a long silence, our hands brushing.

“Did you really skydive?”

“Yeah,” I grin when she looks up. “I thought of you the whole day.”

“That’s so cool.”

“It was, it was so cool. I’ll take you if you still want to go.”

She gives a look that conveys she’s unsure if the invitation is real, which doesn’t settle well at all with me.

She drops her gaze. “Eli?”

“Yes, Whitney?”

She looks down as I lift and warm her other hand between my palms.

“Nothing. Goodnight.”

Pulling her hand from mine, she starts to gather the mini plastic wine bottles from the mattress. Unwilling to let a second of earned intimacy or her undivided attention pass, I decide to drop another truth bomb.

“You know, I was never a Casanova. You just refused to believe me.”

She snorts derisively. “Sure, you weren’t.”

“I lost my virginity my senior year of college to an insane, mouthy, know it all with killer legs who swore she had my number.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



I gape at Eli as he sits propped against the wall, looking utterly devastating in a form-fitting thermal shirt, pinstriped pajama pants, his crystal blue eyes surreal, his words even more so.

“What did you just say?”

“You were my *first* and *only* in college, Whitney.”

“You can’t be serious. Eli, t-t-that’s not true,” I stutter out, sobering considerably.

Floored, I resume my seat next to him, white-knuckling the wine bottles in my hand.

“I was crazy about you, so I took my time with you. I got to know you inside and out. I explored and studied you, memorized you, so I knew exactly how you wanted to be touched.”

“But that can’t be—”

He shakes his head in annoyance as my mind tries to refute it.

“It was you. Only you, and for a long time after, too.”

Searching our memories, the rest of my denial dies on my tongue as images of our beginning start to play out differently. His refusal to kiss me. His utter disdain for the nickname. The long wait to get intimate, nearly two months of dating before we

had sex. And it wasn't just sex. We made love—the most intense, beautiful lovemaking of my life.

“Ah,” he says, his eyes lighting with satisfaction. “So, she *finally* believes me.”

“Oh, my God, Eli—”

“You were worth every bit of the wait, Whitney. You were.”

“H-how is that even possible? I mean...why would they call you—”

“All hearsay bullshit, I have no idea where it stemmed from. Sure, I fucked around a little, I wasn't completely innocent when we met, but I was a far fucking cry from anywhere near resembling that rumor.”

“Why would you let me think...W-why didn't you *tell me*?”

“There's so much I didn't tell you because I was a selfish bastard when it came to how you perceived me back then for reasons I refused to tell you. In truth, I abused your selfless heart, and I did it because it gave me what *I needed*. There's a lot to confess, but I think the most important thing right now is that you know that you were my first and only in college.”

He pushes a loose strand of hair falling from my messy bun behind my ear.

“Please tell me this confession bought me a talk at some point, if nothing else, before we both go home.”

I slowly nod.

“Good.” He lifts the book from the mattress and flips to his earmarked page. “Go, hang with your sisters,” he urges, “they're staring again.”

I stand with the bottles clutched to me, knowing Serena still needs me and that Erin needs to air her own grievances about Brenden, but I can't force myself to walk away. His words from this afternoon come back to me, and Whitney's wants and needs become crystal clear for the first time since I got here. Right now, Whitney wants and needs to talk to Eli, to kiss Eli, to stare openly at Eli without shaming herself for it.

Lingering above him, he looks up from his book and stares back at me, reading those wants and needs.

“Goddamn it, Whitney,” he rasps out, “what I wouldn’t give to be able to give you exactly what you want right now, because I want it too, but we aren’t going to get the privacy we need tonight. I’ll be here tomorrow and the next day, unless you change your mind, okay?”

Biting my lip, I nod and slowly turn back toward the door. Just as I reach it, he speaks up.

“I’ve missed you, Whitney.”

It takes every bit of my willpower to walk through it.



“Oh my God,” Serena groans, her face ghastly white as she enters the kitchen and sidles up to me where I stand at the coffee pot, eyes half-mast. “I’m dying.”

I take down a mug and pour her a cup, my head pounding as my heartbeat pulses at my temples, whispering in my ear – ‘*stupid ass, stupid ass, stupid ass*’ as my stomach churns out a ‘you are not twenty-fucking-five’ and my legs bark, ‘your attempt was lame at best.’

“Did we dance?” Serena asks. “We totally danced, didn’t we?”

“Oh, yeah,” I confirm as my lower back screams, ‘Haha, bitch, I told you not to drink that last bottle.’

“Where is everyone?” She asks, tying her hair in a knot and securing it.

“Our amazing parents took Gracie, Wyatt, and Conner into town for breakfast at the inn and to get pictures with Santa at the pharmacy. Mom was going to attempt to rid Peyton of his contempt, but Eli stepped in and whisked him away with a promise to build another snowman.”

“Eli saved him from Santa?” Serena glances into the dining room to see Eli sitting at the head of the table, pouring Cheerios onto Peyton’s highchair. Peyton pounds at his cereal with a plastic hammer before shoving the remnants into his mouth as Thatch joins them at Eli’s side.

Serena's expression softens considerably as she watches Eli dote on her son, and it's then I know this cheese has been left to stand alone.

Eli has managed to win Serena, and surprisingly I'm fine with it.

I grin at Peyton as he hammers away. I couldn't resist giving him his workshop early—his reaction was a hundred percent worth it. He's been playing with it nonstop since I set it in front of him after dinner last night before passing out early presents to the rest of the kids. My only regret is that Peyton's chosen it as his weapon of choice this morning. Eli looks up at me with sympathy as Peyton bangs away, a sexy grin whispering over his lips before he mouths a 'good morning.' The sight of him sleep rumped, hair disheveled, definitely one I could get used to. I was all too tempted to rouse him from sleep before I hit my wall last night, but I know he wouldn't have let it go far. Sinking into his gaze now, I'm brought back to our kiss and his latest revelation. Peyton rips Eli's attention away with an attempt to grab the box of Cheerios, and it's then that I catch sight of Thatch's forlorn expression as he stares out the window.

"He's so pissed at me," Serena whispers.

"For?"

"I don't know, our fight yesterday, I guess. He wasn't in bed when I woke up."

"Did anything else happen?"

"Shit, you tell me. I haven't drunk that much in a decade."

"We did get a bit rowdy last night." We share a grin, and I tap my coffee cup to hers. "He'll get over it. It was a good night."

"Yeah, it was. Worth it. By the way, you've been pretty tight-lipped. Are we going to talk about," she jerks her head in the direction of the table.

"Soon. I'm willing to hear him out, and I want to go there, badly. *But*, I'm trying not to let the twenty-year-old me take over just yet, ya know?"

She reads the old hurt and hesitation in my eyes and nods. "I get that, but," she glances over at Eli, who gifts her with a smile.

Now she's *batting* for him? Damn him and his voodoo icicle eyes.

"It's just..." The bomb Eli dropped last night about his virginity is burning a hole through my psyche, but I can't bring myself to confess it to her. It feels so personal—so intimately *ours*. Even with my person standing in front of me, I want to keep it between me and the man feet away. "My head is doing enough on its own at the moment. I need to be smart about this."

She stares at me as though I'm literally spewing crap out of my mouth. "Sis, let's be real. You're already so fucking gone."

"Shut up."

"Pack it up girl, you no longer have a case," Serena chuckles, and I elbow her in the boob before trailing her into the dining room. Eli looks up to me as I approach, his eyes twinkling as Serena and I shuffle in with matching hangovers.

"Morning, baby man," Serena kisses Peyton as he stuffs his mouth with remnants of a Cheerio before eyeing Thatch, who doesn't so much as look up at her.

"Morning, babe," Serena says, testing the waters—a slight ache in her voice. Thatch simply nods, picking up his spoon and pressing his cereal into the milk. We all glance up as Brenden and Erin stroll up to the table with sated smiles making it glaringly obvious they both had a good night. It's all I can do not to gawk at Erin as Eli presses his lips together firmly to hide his own amusement. Erin wishes everyone a Snow-White type of 'good morning,' and I swear I see birds land on her shoulders as she eases into her seat.

"Mufasa!" Peyton exclaims, pointing to Erin. The whole table bursts into laughter as Erin frowns at his observation, and Serena leans over to enlighten her.

"You've got one hell of a sex afro going on, sis."

Erin's eyes bulge as she furiously runs her hands through her hair, her gaze darting around. Brenden shrugs with a prideful grin as Erin glowers at him.

"You should be thanking me this morning, wife. I got you out of there as soon as these two idiots started reciting The Pink Lady Pledge."

“Till death do us part, *think pink*,” Serena and I recite together before wincing.

“Which movie is that?” Eli asks.

“Even *I* know that one,” Brenden declares, “Grease.”

Eli nods, “ah.”

“So, Christmas Eve,” Serena addresses Thatch cautiously. “Do you have everything you need to put the b-i-k-e-s together?”

“Yeah,” Thatch says softly, “I’m good.”

“I’ll help,” Eli offers.

“No, man, you don’t have to do that,” Thatch says, distracted by his cereal.

“I really don’t mind. It’ll be cool. I’ve never played Santa.” His admission squeezes my heart as Peyton scolds him with crazy baby eyes pointing his hammer in Eli’s direction. “No Santa!”

“Sorry, buddy,” Eli chuckles.

“No do gain, Lie.” Peyton chides.

“Yes, sir,” Eli lifts his hands. “Really sorry.”

“Otay,” Peyton concedes easily.

I shake my head as Eli and I find ourselves in another stare-off. “Sorry, not even you are safe.”

Eli winks, and my belly flutters. There has to be time for us to talk. Sooner rather than later. He seems to read my thoughts, a whisper of a smile crossing his lips. Lips that have recently set fire to my libido, a fire that’s been raging ever since.

God, I want him. But should I?

“We probably need to get it done today since we’re going to mass tonight,” Thatch says to Eli, “so I’ll take you up on it.”

“Ready when you are,” Eli says, tossing his napkin on his plate.

“I got one for Conner too,” Brenden says, “I’ll catch up with you guys in a bit.”

My eyes flit between the three of them due to the easy camaraderie. Briefly, I have an image of Eli being more than just

a temporary fixture at the table. Fear snakes its way into me as my thumping head scolds my repeatedly beating heart for already going *there* with that line of thinking. A breath later, blinding pain shoots through me. Eyes watering, I turn to see Peyton with his plastic hammer, culprit, and source.

“Oh my God, Peyton,” Serena gasps, “no hit Auntie Whit!”

Peyton speaks up in his defense. “Do not matta! In de past! Past hewts!”

Head smarting and feeling betrayed—I gawk at the baby as a second of silence ensues before the whole table bursts into hysterical laughter. Eli’s laugh in particular bellows throughout the dining room, his head tossed back, body shaking as I turn to Peyton massaging my stinging scalp.

“Traitorous little shit,” I mutter beneath the roar of the table. Peyton grins broadly, proud of himself for causing such a reaction. Laughter slowing, Eli’s smiling eyes catch mine, a fond sparkle inside them I recognize. His expression softens further as he runs a soothing hand over my head before cupping my cheek briefly, his thumb brushing my jaw before he pulls it away.

“You okay?”

“I think so.”

He’s not even trying to mask his affection for me at this point, and I know all eyes are on us as the laughter slows, but I can’t bring myself to care.

Even with my scalp screaming, I feel the urgent need to free myself of the rest of my hurt and resentment—if only to give myself a chance. To be able to open myself to him. It’s one thing to say you forgive someone, another thing entirely to actually *do it*. Within these weighted seconds, I feel the shift of it. The bulk of it beginning to lift as an age-old question circles my mind.

What if?

“I don’t remember going to bed,” Serena speaks up. “How exactly did I get there?”

Tearing my eyes from Eli, I nod toward Thatch, who keeps his focus on his uneaten breakfast. It’s when Serena addresses him that the whole table tenses in unease. “Hey, husband.”

Thatch looks up, his eyes weary.

“I love you,” she stresses, evident ache in her declaration. “You know that, right?”

Thatch nods and stands, turning to Eli. “Meet you in the garage?”

“Right behind you,” Eli assures as Thatch takes his bowl to the kitchen before making his way to the hall tree. Serena stares after him as he slides on his jacket and into his boots before slipping out the front door. Coffee in hand, she stands, her voice shaking when she speaks. “I’m going to go shower.”

My eyes follow as she makes her way up the stairs, and I turn to Eli, who raises a brow in question. Despite the urge to go after her, I dip my chin in agreement with him and let her go because he’s right. They have to figure this out for themselves. As much as I want to help, I can’t bridge the gap between them. It’s something they have to work through together.

“Fuck, I hope they figure that shit out,” Brenden mutters. “It’s painful to watch.”

Opening my mouth to speak, Eli beats me to it. “He’s hurting because he loves her, and he’s terrified he can’t be the man she needs. I’ve been there.”

Before I can soak in his statement fully, Eli stands and addresses Brenden. “See you out there.”

Without waiting for his reply, Eli walks over to the hall tree, putting on his jacket and boots before closing the door softly behind him. Eyes lingering on the front door, I sit stunned by his confession while my heart lurches in the direction he left.

“How long are you going to deny you still feel for him, Whitney?” Brenden asks as Erin fidgets uncomfortably next to him. In the painfully sober light of day, Erin is far less liberal—as am I. It seems my ex is braver in that sense now, where he used to cower completely. He’s right. The tables have turned. He’s willing to give in to the whims of his heart out in the open now. Something I used to be able to do so freely—so recklessly—without much thought of self-preservation.

“Come on, buddy,” I say to Peyton, unsnapping his bib, “let’s go play.”

“Whitney,” Brenden snaps in a rare, serious tone. “He’s practically been on his knees the whole time he’s been here.”

“Let it go, Brenden. It’s not your place.”

“You’re being a jerk.”

“You know, maybe I am. It’s still between the two of us,” I snap.

“He’s a fucking great guy. If you’d give him—”

Fed up, I glare at my brother while waving my hand to cut him off. “You don’t know the full story because you never asked. And you never asked because you’re the definition of a *narcissist*. You rarely give a crap about anything that doesn’t involve *you*.”

“Whatever, you’re fucking up, and someone needs to point it out to you.”

“Is that so? Is that what we’re doing right now? Are we pointing out each other’s fuck ups? Okay, how about I answer your question as soon as you acknowledge that you bulldozed your wife into making the life-altering decision to move away from a city she grew up in and loved. Away from her parents, lifelong friends, her church, and her community to suit your selfish ambition—and in the process, it’s made her miserable. How’s that for fucking up?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Erin's mouth goes slack, her furious eyes meeting mine as I nervously glance over at her.

"I'm so sorry, sis. It's just that I love you so much, and you're hurting so badly." I avert my gaze back to my brother. "For someone so intent on pointing out what's *painfully obvious* to me, why can't you see your own *wife* is hiding her pain to make *your* life easier. Even so, how is it you can't recognize how *devastated* she is, you *stupid ass*. You need to stop thinking your success is any sort of consolation for all that you've taken away from her before she really starts to resent you."

Gathering Peyton from his highchair, I leave Brenden and Erin at the table as utter silence ensues, knowing I just opened a can of worms. Halfway up the stairs, Brenden finally speaks up.

"Baby, is that true?"

Erin's sniff has me pausing.

My brother speaks again, utter devastation in his tone. "Erin, look at me. Is that how you really feel?" Erin's answering sob cracks my heart. "Jesus Christ, baby...come here." I hear the slide of a chair as I head up the attic stairs. Guilt covers me briefly as I realize my timing is horrible. But at the same time, *why?*

It seems we're all wasting time trying to save face and push our issues aside, and for what—because it's a holiday? It's like we're all hiding behind “it's fine, we're fine,” masks, tiptoeing around our issues—*serious issues*—and for what? The idea of a perfect Christmas?

Serena was right. The picture we have for our lives, even down to a postcard holiday, doesn't exist. Real memories worth keeping are made in the moment. They aren't planned. We don't thrive off idyllic. We thrive off real human emotion and experience. The here and now, and then our mind deciphers later which memories are our fondest.

Eli's reappearance ripped my “I'm fine” mask off. And though I was furious at first, I feel a strange liberation and much-needed accountability for the situation I'm in.

I'm the one who didn't conquer my birthday bucket list.

I'm the one whose ambitions took a back seat to comfort.

I'm the one who's blaming shitty circumstances for the things I do and don't have at this point in my life.

I'm also the one who closed myself off to the endless possibilities and made decisions about my future without really weighing how much I could lose because of them.

Liberation. That's what I feel now that I can fully admit these things to myself.

Am I sorted? Hell no, far from it, but I'm not hiding anymore.

Serena did the same for Thatch, and they can no longer ignore the space currently threatening their marriage.

Unfortunately for my shithead brother, it was his turn to get a wake-up call, especially because of his false level of contentment this morning. He got laid last night, so all is well?

Shitttttt.

Plenty of women don't withhold sex as a weapon. It doesn't mean they don't hold grudges. It just means they're going to *get theirs* while they're pissed. She might have acquired the use of my brother's stick shift last night, but I guarantee *she* was the one driving.

Eww.

Even so, *get yours*, sis.

And now that all our masks are off, we're floating in the same chaotic, directionless atmosphere together. Hopefully—at some point—no matter how bad the turbulence gets, we'll rely on each other to get us through it and bring us back to the ground—the very definition of gravity.

Something we've all forgotten, something we all need to remember.

As I watch Peyton playing with his workshop, I decide that the repair most needed now for me has to start from within.

"Hey, babe, where you at?" Eli calls from the front door.

Panicked he's home early, I swipe the box off the counter and toss it in the direction of the trash. "In here," I call just as Eli pokes his head in, covered in post-run sweat, looking gorgeous. His form-fitting cotton T-shirt is soaked and sticking to his tan skin, his hair deliciously disheveled. He takes a step into the room and pulls me into him, kissing me briefly, his heart still pounding heavily in his chest from his workout.

"Feel better?" I ask as his eyes glitter down on me, and he nods.

"Much."

"I knew you would. There's no reason to be nervous. You're going to nail the interview."

"Hope so."

"I got you something," I say, pulling the box from my purse, which sits on the counter.

He gives me a beautiful flash of teeth. "Oh yeah?"

"It's not a big deal."

He opens the small box and studies the cuff links.

"I thought if you decide to wear the suit, they would go perfect. I couldn't afford anything too fancy, but these—"

He grips my chin with his fingers. "They're perfect," he says softly.

"Yeah?"

“Yeah, thank you, Bee,” he murmurs before taking my lips in a slow, appreciative kiss. Dizzied when he pulls away, I fight the temptation for the millionth time to declare my love and, for the millionth time, pray he beats me to it.

It’s been agony feeling so much for him and not being able to express it. So many times I’ve felt it from him, even in the beginning, but the words haven’t come.

In my heart, I know it’s just a matter of time, and like all other things Eli, I know the wait will be worth it.

“What are you thinking about?”

“If you get the job, I want to take you to dinner.”

“I probably won’t know—” He stiffens, and I rear back in confusion as his smile disappears, his eyes focused on the floor. Glancing back, I see the hastily discarded box between the trash can and the toilet. Pulling away from me completely, he picks up the test strip from the top of the trash and barely glances at it before gripping it in his fist.

“It’s negative.”

“I see that, and why wouldn’t it be?” It’s the edge of accusation and the chill in his voice that puts me immediately on the defensive.

“Pregnancy is a risk you take when you’re constantly fucking without a condom.” I snatch the test from his closed hand and toss it back in the trash—along with the box—as his demeanor changes entirely. His disposition is like a knife to the chest.

“It was just to make sure, Eli. I’m only six days late, but it’s normal sometimes for me to jump around when I’m stressed and finals—”

He scoffs and shakes his head, which starts my blood simmering.

“I don’t get what you’re doing here...what the hell is this reaction? There’s no issue. It’s negative.”

His hesitance to discuss anything long-term is one thing because we haven’t even been dating a year, but this?

“Is any part of you disappointed you’re not pregnant?” The acidic drip of accusation pushes the knife in deeper.

“I don’t like the way you’re acting,” I snap, sidestepping him to break free of the tension in the room. He grabs my wrist, stopping my retreat, his voice void of any sign of tenderness—a far cry from the man I’ve fallen hopelessly in love with. I jerk my arm away as he eyes me. In those seconds of confusion, everything changes. I can feel an unraveling inside him. It’s almost as if he’s been waiting for this moment. The distance between us goes from molecularly close to galaxies apart though there isn’t more than a few inches between us.

“Answer me, Whitney.”

“Don’t talk to me like that. I’m not your kid. And you don’t have one coming, so I don’t see the point in this.”

“Whitney,” his tone levels me, but I lift my chin, undeterred and completely over shying away from the real questions I want to ask. Over his hot and cold and fluctuating guard.

“I could imagine it.”

“Meaning yes. Did you at all hope you were pregnant?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, it fucking matters.” The haunted look in his eyes can’t be for me. This isn’t the Eli who playfully tucks me in at night and reads me chapters of his boring books. This isn’t the Eli who hovers above, murmuring praises to me as he worships my body. This isn’t the Eli who makes me tuna fish sandwiches and puts a vitamin on top when I’ve been too busy studying and forget to eat.

The man in front of me is so cold, he’s unrecognizable.

I swallow. “First of all, I wouldn’t dream of thinking about something so serious without discussing it with you. Again, Eli, the test is negative, so what is your problem?”

“You’re always talking about your perfect family. It’s not hard to imagine that’s what you want.”

“Isn’t that what most women want? A beautiful man who loves them enough to make a life with them, to someday create a family with? You’re acting like it’s a fucking crime.”

“I think I’ve made myself pretty clear where I stand with all of that.”

“All of that?” I snap. “All of that? Is the idea of marriage and children so disgusting to you?”

“I didn’t say it was disgusting.”

“You don’t have to. Your face said it for you.”

He blows out a stressed breath. “I have an interview in an hour and a half, Whitney. We don’t need to get into this now.”

“You started it, so tough shit. I’ve spent eight months tiptoeing around this, but you have never been so vicious about it. Is this really your stance? Does someday and maybe really translate to never for you?”

He rips off his shirt and eyes the test before toeing off his Nikes.

“I’m curious, Eli, when would be a good time to talk about our future? You graduate in two fucking weeks, and you haven’t so much as discussed what comes next with me. Is the day you get your diploma our expiration date?”

He grips the counter and hangs his head. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Pain engulfs me as I gape at him. “You don’t fucking know?”

“I overreacted. I’m sorry.”

“Fuck the test, look at me,” I demand. He turns to me, his jaw set, his eyes distant.

“Tell me why you pursued me. If a future with me is so abhorrent, why the hell did you stay with me when I showed you who I was and what I’m about?”

He scrubs his face. “I never wanted to...”

“Lead me on? Are you fucking serious right now?”

“Whitney—”

“Lead. Me. On? You started a full-blown relationship with me, making fucking sure I couldn’t possibly want anyone else.”

Eight months. Eight months of my life I trusted him, and despite his hang-ups and hesitance, I let myself believe we had some semblance of a future. Even when Grammy P’s voice cautioned me, ‘a hesitant man isn’t a man to put your hopes into,’

I allowed myself to freefall for him. Sadly, I didn't fully hear or understand her warning until now.

I had all the right examples set for me, and I dove into the relationship like I didn't know what commitment truly looked like. But I did. I knew, and I ignored it to be with him.

"Do I know you at all?"

Eli grips his T-shirt in his hand, turns, and starts the water.

"Do you even give a damn that you're hurting me right now?"

His voice is faint. "Of course, I do."

He turns back, and his eyes find mine in the mirror.

"Oh my God," I say. "Oh, my God," I repeat, in disbelief as he keeps his gaze locked with mine, the truth so fucking evident, so plain to see. Eli had made zero plans for a future with me.

"You knew. You knew the whole time there were never any plans to make with me, didn't you?"

"Whitney, I'm not capable of—"

"Fuck you!" I scream as tears of defeat gather in my eyes. "Tell me why," I demand. "Just tell me why."

Tears multiply down my cheeks, and his eyes follow their tracks before he drops his gaze altogether.

"Don't! Don't you dare. I deserve to know. Say something, say something you bastard! Say something! Just tell me why I'm not enough for you. Why wasn't I enough? Tell me why you did this to me!"

Silence.

"Eli!"

When he lifts his eyes to mine, I feel the complete break between us.

"I'm sorry, Whitney. I just don't think I can be the man you need me to be."

"Jesus, I can't believe this." Gathering my purse from the counter, I fight the urge to slap him as my entire being shakes with betrayal. He's so calm, too calm, and that's what hurts the

most. I couldn't mean anything to him if he's this unaffected. But it's just not possible. Bleeding freely, I take one last look at him. "When you regret this—and you will—stay the fuck away from me."

Gathering everything that belongs to me, I shove it in my purse as I try to breathe through it. Arms full, and knowing I won't be making another trip back, I pause just outside the bathroom door trying to will myself to walk away—taking a breath and then two. Losing the battle, I glance back into the bathroom to see his face twisted in anguish as he steps into the shower before turning to face the stream. I hate him too much to try to decipher anything he might be feeling. Irony wraps around me that I'm leaving him where I found him eight months ago. He's just brutally ripped my heart out and, not only that, made it clear he'd been planning to at some point. But for how long? It seems like I only sped up the inevitable by taking a pregnancy test.

I thought we were happy.

Did he fake every part of our relationship? Why did he stay with me so long and play into the illusion? A one-and-done would have been so much better because then I wouldn't have memorized him so completely—his smell, his moods, his quirks, his preferences, every small detail that makes him Eli. Did I build him up? Was he ever that man?

He purposely deceived me. He allowed me to fall, only to step back and watch me shatter right in front of him. He allowed it all—fueled the farce—while I allowed him to brand his name across my heart.

But did he brand it? Or did I?

How could I have been so wrong?

How could I have given him so much of me without ample reason to?

With every step I take, I will my heart to beat differently—to heal differently. I demand that it piece itself back stronger. I will it to mend reinforced—like a scar—even if it becomes unrecognizable to me. I will it to mend together more selective, more attuned to my mind that warned me away from him. I will it

to become far more resilient so that the weak version would have no inkling just how debilitating the pain would be.

Two weeks after I left Eli in the shower, he graduated from UNC and left Chapel Hill. He never contacted me. Not a call, not a text. Nothing. That was the most brutal blow—his utter and complete disappearance from my life.

In turn, I fled home and spent the summer willing my heart to grow back stronger.

For seventeen years, I convinced myself that it worked. Eli's reappearance has completely destroyed that illusion for me. Inside dwells the same heart of the same girl he shattered, no matter how many fine lines she's acquired or how much life she's lived. No matter how many experiences she's collected or how wise she thinks she's become.

There is no separation from who I am now to twenty-year-old Whitney. Our heart beats exactly the same way, where Eli's brand remains.

"I sowy," Peyton says, climbing into my lap and placing a tiny hand on the tears rolling down my cheeks. "Ti Whit, I sowy, I not dowit gain," Peyton says as I hold him tightly to me.

"No, baby, I'm not sad," I sniff.

"No sad?"

"No way, Jose."

"Way Jose," Peyton repeats, his eyes filled with worry for the pain he believes he's inflicted on me. My beautiful little man. It's surreal just how much children are attuned to emotions that adults pretend to be oblivious of. They're the ones who deserve the title of hero, living bravely, taking chances, leaping before looking, letting their emotions through—the definition of living out loud. As for adults, the more we grow, the more we seem to hide ourselves, our emotions—and it's considered an act of maturity. Seems to me it's more of an act of cowardice. The truly brave are those who can love and live with the fearless heart of a child.

It's then I decide my nephew is right and fully take his advice. Whatever happened back then truly is in the past, and in Eli's case, my past with him hurt. It hurt so much. But the present?

I'm growing quite fond of the Eli Welch of the *present*.

"The past hurts, huh?" I sniff, marveling at my little man and his hammered in truth.

"Mep," Peyton says, pat patting my face.

I can't help my laugh as I shake my head. "Out of the mouth of babes." I squeeze him as he tries to wiggle free. "I love you sooooo much, Pey Pey. So much. Forever and ever."

"Soooo much," he nods.

"Want to make *Rudolph* some cookies?"

"Mep." He immediately leaps from my lap when I release him.

"Up?" I offer.

"I do it," Peyton insists, heading for the door.

"Oh, please don't claim your independence just yet, kid. I don't think I can handle it today."

"Comere," he insists, already at the door. "We go. Mere!"

"Yes, sir," I follow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



“Thanks so much for your help, man,” Thatch says as I tighten the last bolt with the Allen wrench.

“No problem,” I step back and admire my handy work on Gracie’s glittery neon pink bike. “They’re going to go nuts.”

“Hope so.” Thatch flashes me his first genuine smile since we hit the garage. When we started unloading the bike parts from the boxes, I tested the waters to see if he wanted to vent and carefully read the room. He didn’t. So, together we worked diligently, making small talk, and managed to get both bikes assembled in record time. I flick the fire-colored tassels on Peyton’s new tricycle as Thatch gathers the packaging and trashes it. “This is perfect. It suits him.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“Wonder what happened to Brenden,” I ask, eyeing the box sitting in the corner that holds Conner’s bike. “Should we get started without him?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Thatch grabs the box as Brenden enters the side door of the garage, and we both glance over to see him looking completely lost, his expression pained.

“Shit, what’s wrong?” Thatch asks.

“I’m an idiot,” Brenden mutters. “Let’s leave it at that.”

Brenden grabs the box from Thatch and rips it open, commercial staples and all, and Thatch’s eyes bulge.

“Dude,” Thatch steps forward and lays a hand on Brenden’s shoulder. “Why don’t you take a breath. I don’t think the bike is safe from you right now. How about we step back a minute?”

“I’m good,” Brenden snaps, “let’s just get this done.”

“The fuck you are, you’re hulking out,” Thatch says, reaching for the box just as I step up to Brenden.

“Let me unpack it for you, all right?”

Brenden nods, relinquishing the box to me before running his hands through his hair, eyes glazing over.

“All right, man,” Thatch says, “it’s your turn. What’s going on?”

“My wife is fucking miserable in Charlotte. She’s *miserable*, and it’s my fault. I made the decision to start Network and move us there without realizing how much it would affect her. That’s because I thought it’s just a drive, right? If she got homesick, we’d just drive to Nashville, and it would tide her over, but that’s not how it’s played out. While I’ve been obsessed with the startup, my wife has been at home *crying. Alone*, missing her parents, her friends, and I haven’t been there for her. She’s been hiding it from me. So yeah...fuck!” He picks up something within reach and tosses it across the garage before clasping his hands on top of his head. “I feel so fucking bad, and I have no idea how to remedy this.”

“You had to have suspected,” Thatch says.

“I mean, yeah, but I just figured she’d adjust.” His voice is laced with guilt when he poses his question to Thatch. “Could you tell she was miserable?”

“I mean, not really, but Erin’s hard to read because she’s so laid back.” Thatch shrugs. “Not that I’m an expert.”

Pulling the plastic away from the frame of Conner’s bike, I lay it out on the small worktop before I start lining the rest of the parts up.

“I swear to God I didn’t think...no that’s bullshit. Maybe I didn’t want to *see it*. I don’t know, but there’s no way I can’t see it now. This is so fucked.”

Tearing open the plastic bag full of screws, I line them up before flipping through the instruction manual as they chatter at my back.

“I wish I knew what to tell you, brother. It’s been a real shit show lately between Serena and me. I’m kind of lost on what to do myself.”

Satisfied with the setup, I grab my wrench and turn back to address them both before I bite my bleeding tongue off.

“*Brenden*,” I belt sharply as they both stop and divert their attention to me. “Move your family back to Nashville and *travel* for scheduled meetings with the high-profile clients. It’s fucking 2021, you can work from anywhere, and you’re the boss. While you’re getting settled in, I’m more than capable of doing the handholding temporarily in Charlotte until you can start the commute.”

I divert my attention to Thatch.

“Thatch, Serena is dying for some *intimate* attention, a real connection with you. Not a playful butt slap or a backward compliment. She needs some semblance of romance back in the marriage. I’m about ninety percent positive she was attempting to give you a blow job, and unknowingly, you *rejected her*. That’s why she was crying in the store the day you two had your blowout. It was an attempt to get your attention in a *sexual way* so she could talk to you and tell you she misses the intimacy between the two of you. When that backfired, it broke her heart.”

Thatch’s jaw drops as Brenden’s face contorts in disgust.

“Sorry, Brenden, but they didn’t have two kids by immaculate conception. Jesus is an only child.”

“How the hell do you know this?” Thatch asks.

“Because though I’m not at all proud of it, I’ve been eavesdropping on every conversation in this house since I got here. I’ve been trying to learn as much about Whitney as I can to figure out a way to earn a place back in her life. It was wrong, and I’m only partially sorry about it. But, my reasoning for it is

after seventeen years apart—I'm pretty sure I'm still in love with her.”

I address a wide-eyed Brenden first. “If I succeed in winning her back, I might hurt her because life is fucking unpredictable, and there are no guarantees, but I swear to God I'll do everything in my power not to. And I might as well toss in that I figured out you were her brother during our first week working together—not when I saw the picture in your living room. I took it as a sign and kept hoping for a chance meeting. When it didn't happen, I got impatient and hinted for an invitation just for the chance to see her again.” I turn to Thatch. “I'm ready to earn my place at the table. Whitney knows *none of this*, and I don't want her hearing it from anyone *but me*. If by a Christmas miracle I manage to pull it off and win her back, I'll have my work cut out for me to earn back her trust. She's not going to make it easy, but *your* individual solutions seem pretty cut and dried. Earmuffs, Brenden,” I say pointedly.

I pause, giving Brenden ample time to tune out, but his jaw only lowers further as I turn back to Thatch. “Fuck the hell out of your wife, and while you do it, shower her with affection. And do yourself a solid by not ever asking her what's for dinner, *ever again*. That goes for both of you.”

I flit my gaze back to Brenden.

“Move Erin home, and in doing so, you'll show her that her happiness is more important to you than anything else. Oh, and slide your hat backward next time you get a chance. It's a major turn-on for her.”

Brenden and Thatch gape at me as I smack an Allen wrench in Brenden's palm. “Ruby and Allen still have sex, and from the sound of it, good sex, so your *winky* is probably safe. If Dad's still going strong in his sixties,” I give him a wink, “that should give you some hope.”



Mouthwatering smells drift in from the kitchen, where Ruby remains hard at work as Whitney and Gracie perform the

rehearsed Tik Tok dance Gracie has been drilling Whitney on for the last half hour. Serena grins as she records the duo on her phone. Whitney swivels her hips perfectly in time with the music, her face coated in heavy makeup that she let Gracie cake on before they recorded—which only endears her further to me.

It's clear she would do anything for her family, even if it included embarrassing herself on the internet for her niece. This type of devotion attracted me to her in the past and remains a part of her make up.

We haven't had a second alone today due to her helping Ruby prep the Christmas Eve feast, cookie decorating with the kids, and helping Serena and Erin wrap. All of this happening *before* Allen's airtight planned festivities for the night. Even so, I've shamelessly studied her every chance I've gotten. The pull is still so fucking there, as it has been from day one.

"She's looking at you again," Thatch nudges me from where he sits next to me on the couch, remote in hand as he pretends to flip through the channels while on watch. He's been nothing but enthusiastic about me making progress with Whitney since my confession in the garage.

"Appreciate you looking out," I say with a chuckle.

After their third take, Gracie plays the footage back, seemingly satisfied as Whitney collapses in a dining room chair, sweaty and breathless.

She catches my eyes as I scour her in jeans, a form-fitting sweater, and her elf slippers. Her eyes light as I slowly sweep her, and I swear I can read her thoughts as she stares back at me.

Dare I think we're flirting?

Conner quickly steals her attention away, asking for help. Disappointment crosses her features briefly before she pulls Conner into her lap and begins aiding her in outlining a sugar cookie.

When her golden gaze again finds mine, I bite my lip and get the desired effect when her own lips lift into a sultry smile.

Yeah, we most definitely are flirting.

The familiar electricity zings through me as warmth spreads through my chest.

Something's changed...shifted between us since last night and this morning. She seems more open to me now. Somehow the door I was sure was sealed shut is now cracked. Could my confession last night have rocked her that much? How will she react when I'm finally able to dole out the rest of the truth?

I don't want to chance it right now, not when the vibe we have going is *this* good. I wonder if it's possible to get her to agree to a second chance without first giving her my full confession. If so, that would be more than I could ever ask and more than I should. Is she really capable of forgiving me *without it*? At the moment, it feels possible.

"No, son," Allen barks at Brenden as he steps back, inspecting the lights Brenden strung above the karaoke machine. Allen is serious about his backdrop since I've heard the word at least a dozen times since they started setting up an hour ago.

"Annnnd she's looking at you *again*," Thatch draws out, pulling another laugh from me. "So, what are you going to do? What's your plan?"

"I was way too controlling last time," I confess quickly. "This time, I'm going to leave things up to her."

"Well, whatever you're doing, it's working."

"I'm being honest," I say simply because it's the truth. I've exposed myself, made a fool of myself in a way I never have before. It's been terrifying, humbling and in a sense, liberating. I turn to Thatch, who's eyeing Serena as she helps Wyatt and Peyton on the floor with a puzzle. "I appreciate the heads up, man, really, I do, but shouldn't you be formulating your own plan?"

"I have one."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I had one," he grimaces, "but I sort of fucked up the execution. I plan on remedying that tonight after church." Thatch nudges me as Serena makes her way into the kitchen. I look down to see him crack open a box where a huge solitaire and accompanying wedding band with two diamonds sits inside it.

"One for each of our babies." He discreetly clips it closed and pockets the box. "It was way past time for an upgrade. It's been a

bitch keeping this on me since we got here without her sniffing it out, and there's a reason the books haven't been adding up the past month." He smirks. "I know her a lot better than she thinks I do. I've just been biding my time. I'm only sorry I've hurt her in playing ignorant. By the end of the night, she's going to know exactly why I've been aloof. I'm going to ask her to renew our vows."

"That's awesome, man, really."

"As much as she drives me batshit, I would do anything for her."

"That's obvious, with or without the rock."

I glance back over to Whitney, knowing the clock is ticking, and I still haven't found the right gift for under twenty bucks that in any way relays how well I know her. Just as panic begins to creep in, a notion strikes and my gears start turning. I turn back to Thatch. "If you're covered, I have an idea, but I'll need your help. Can you give me a lift?"

"I'm growing pretty fond of your ideas," Thatch says.

"Might have one for Brenden, too."

"Say no more. I'm in."

I nod. "Grab Brenden. Tell the girls we're going to get more wood. I'll meet you at your SUV."

"On it."

Standing abruptly, I charge toward the hall tree, slip on my coat, and head outside.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



“Ladies and Gentlemen!” Brenden belts into the microphone before glancing down at his cue card. The Space Odyssey theme song blares through the speakers as colorful spotlights whirl throughout the darkened living room.

“Are you serious, Dad?” Brenden questions into the mic.

“Just say it, son!” Dad screams from the kitchen, “You’re already screwing up the pacing!”

We all laugh where we sit huddled in the rearranged furniture facing the small stage, a stage Eli helped Dad haul into the living room and assemble. Not once today have I been able to look away from him, knowing what I know, his confessions still swirling around in my head and chest. The confessions—along with the heated glances he’s been sending my way—have wooed me into a state, a dire need to get closer. So much closer.

We haven’t had a minute alone since last night. Even though I hoped to have time for ‘the talk’ today, I got swamped with a to-do list a mile long to get things ready for tonight’s festivities.

Even as I broke my back to help get it all done, I spent most of my time daydreaming about another kiss—my appetite growing as we exchanged loaded looks throughout the day. The butterflies haven’t just been swarming, they’ve invaded me

completely, and I've allowed it. Anticipation has left me heavy with want, the mere idea of getting intimate with Eli again consuming my thoughts.

He sits nearby in the love seat, dressed to perfection in a thick sweater that bulks up his already impressive frame and snug jeans, his perfectly coiffed hair only slightly disheveled from his earlier wrestling session with Peyton. Wyatt sits in his lap now, seemingly content, Gracie at his side, Conner on the other. In a mere five days, they've all fallen for him and seem to be flocking to him naturally.

Ignoring the gnawing reminder of how the last daydreams backfired, I bat away the idea that he's faking any part of his participation with my family. It's far too genuine to be contrived. Bothered by the mere idea of it, I flick my gaze back to Brenden as he finishes the prepared minute-long introduction.

“And now, I'd like to introduce to you the father of Rock ‘n’ Roll, the one and only, ELVIS PRESLEY!”

“AND!?” Dad barks from the kitchen.

“And what?!” Brenden snaps into the microphone, the feedback causing us all to cringe.

“Read the card, jackass!”

“Oh,” Brenden rolls his eyes, his voice flat, “his hunka hunka burnin' sidekick.”

See See Rider begins to play as Dad struts in, decked out from head to foot in Elvis garb with Peyton in his arms, dressed similarly in his own studded white jumpsuit, matching white boots, and Elvis wig.

Laughter bursts out of me as Brenden shakes his head, his own laughter pouring out as he hands the mic over to the King. Dad produces a mini-studded mic for Peyton before setting him down. Both of them launch into timed karate kicks as the Collins women—me included—scream our enthusiasm through our laughter. Dad begins to sing as a thoroughly rehearsed Peyton gyrates his hips.

“This is why he's been stealing him away!” Serena spouts through a hilarity-coated scream. “Go, baby, go!”

I glance over to see Thatch, Brenden, and Eli full-on belly laughing, their eyes lit with amusement. Mom claps enthusiastically, dancing in her chair as Dad starts to sing See See Rider, doing an immaculate impression of Elvis's movements. Well, as immaculate as a man in his sixties can, his deep, melodic voice as impressive as ever.

Glancing over at Eli, I can see the surprise in his face at my father's talent. Pride fills me as I keep my camera up, capturing every second of their performance. Dad points to Peyton when the song ends, pausing for effect as Peyton dips his chin, his unsecured wig wobbling as Peyton barks out a "Tank u berry much."

We all cheer, standing in unison. After taking a bow, Dad scoops Peyton into his arms, his eyes sparkling as he praises his grandson. After a little prompt, Peyton covers Dad's mouth in a sloppy kiss. I manage to capture it at the last second with my phone knowing one day—when Peyton is far out of his teens—he will cherish the image. Permanent grin in place, I glance over at Eli to see him paling rapidly as he slowly lifts Wyatt from his lap, staring at the baby like he's an extra-terrestrial. Gracie and Conner screech in terror, abandoning Eli's side as I stand, frowning in confusion. It's only when I draw near and see what's leaking all over Eli that I rush toward him.

Shit continues to spill from Wyatt's diaper, down his legs and booted feet as Eli starts to dry heave. When Wyatt kicks his feet, delivering a foot-sized splatter against Eli's chest and neck, Eli's head bobs to the side as if he's about to pass out.

"Oh my God," Erin exclaims, picking up a nearby nursing blanket and wrapping it around Wyatt before whisking him out of Eli's arms. Eli jerks forward with another dry heave as Brenden starts to laugh hysterically. Mom races to the kitchen as Serena scurries toward her loaded diaper bag for supplies.

"I can't!" Eli looks up at me helplessly before dry heaving again. "I-I can't handle it, Whitney, help me!"

I rip the towel from Mom's grip as she comes flying in from the kitchen and cover Eli's lap with it.

"Get up!" I order, holding the towel firmly to him. "Get up now!"

Eli lurches to his feet as I usher him down the hall and into the bathroom, his uncontrollable gags bouncing around us as I try not to laugh—and fail.

“Hold on!” I manage to get out through a snort, “just a little further.”

Yanking him into the bathroom, I close the door and unbuckle his jeans as he bends over the sink, dry heaving repeatedly.

“Slippers!” I bark as he kicks them off, and I rip his pants and boxers down before turning and flipping on the shower. When I turn back, I see his sweater is covered in runny baby shit.

“Sweater!” I exclaim as he carefully takes it off to avoid hitting his face and tosses it on the floor like it’s on fire. Through another wretch, I guide him to step under the water before I ball up his clothes in a towel.

“I’ll go get more clothes from your suitcase and leave them on the counter.”

“Thank—” Eli wretches again, and my stomach turns as the smell hits me.

“What the—” wretch—“fuck”—wretch—“do they put” wretch—heave “in baby food?”

More laughter explodes out of me as I watch him struggle while bracing his arms out against the tiles, the dry heaving subsiding as he gulps in deep breaths of air. My laugh slows as my eyes begin to wander, and my brain recognizes he’s naked. I shouldn’t at all find it sexy, especially with the stench and circumstance, but it’s been seventeen years since I’ve had this view...and holy fuck is it better than ever.

Soaking him in as he tries not to puke, I allow my eyes to roam freely. And they do, over his biceps to his defined pecs, down his pebbled abs, and lower...to his perfect cock. The fat mushroom tip that juts out between his thick muscular thighs is mouthwatering, exactly like I remember it. From the side, I can see every notable highlight of Eli Welch—including his flawless, full ass. An ass I used to love sinking my nails into as he drove into me.

When his breathing evens out and his chest stops pumping, he lifts his head, his eyes cutting straight to me.

Bolt after bolt strikes as we face off, engulfed in an electrical storm of our own creation. The tension palpable in the very molecules of the air we're breathing as we sink into our connection. And I allow it, allow myself to get lost in him in those seconds, my foolish heart thundering as the current runs through me.

"Bee," a name, the pet name Eli reserved for the tenderest of moments between us, falls like a plea from his lips. A plea to forgive him. A plea to remember what made us special—what made us good. A plea to let go of the hurts and just embrace what we are now and maybe, what we could become. What he doesn't know is that I've already forgiven him—mostly for myself but also for the chance of us.

It's fear that keeps me idle and fear alone, and I'm doing my best to bat it away. It's up to me to give him the power to hurt me again, and I want to. I want to hand it over so badly, but right *now*, all I want to do is trace the lines of his body, to feel him push inside me while I look in his eyes, to feed the hunger that's been growing inside of me.

My chest fills with a surreal warmth as I take in the man version of the boy I fell so crazy in love with so many moons ago. Not even the shit-filled clothes in my hand can put a damper on the strength of the heat and emotions building between us. It's the noise drifting in from the living room that reminds me that we're not alone, and this isn't the time. It can't be. Even if I want to, I can't at all act on anything I'm feeling, so I turn and force myself out the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



Freshly showered and mildly tainted, I wrap a towel around my waist, bracing my hands on the sink as I grapple with the heavy ache taking over me.

It was there. We were *there* in our place, it was written all over her, and I felt every second of it. It was undeniable—the ache, need, the same longing I felt. It took every bit of strength in me not to act on it, but I promised her I wouldn't until she asked me to. That act tested me to my limits. We were so close, so damned close.

“Fuck,” I mutter, cursing our current circumstances because, in that moment, there was no way to whisk her away and close the space between us the way her eyes begged me to.

Slipping into the clothes Whitney laid out for me, I turn off the ancient squealing bathroom fan and step out, closing the door.

Turning to head back into the family room, I'm stopped dead in my tracks by the opening of a song and a voice—*her* voice. Heart tripling in speed, I haul ass down the hallway and stop, stunned by the sight that greets me. Whitney stands on stage, dressed in her designated Christmas pajamas and elf slippers, her angelic hair hanging in waves along her shoulders, microphone in hand as her perfect lips begin pouring out lyrics.

Like me, her family sits unmoving, equally as taken with her as she begins a slow build, her voice both inviting and arresting. Inching back, I stop at the threshold of the living room, with a perfect view of her and *only her*. Whitney effortlessly hits every note, her gift stunning me as the song picks up pace. She sings of intimacy between lovers, of infatuation, and a memory flits in of us tangled in my bed, tracing each other's naked skin with new lovers' eyes.

The weight of what I felt in the bathroom with her is nothing compared to the gravity of what's overtaking me now as she sings.

It's a song I've heard before, [Celine Dion](#), but the title escapes me. Though it's a love song that belongs to someone else, she's effortlessly making it her own.

In our time together, I caught her singing in the shower and once or twice in the car. I always encouraged her to keep going, but she always shied away, a rare blush coating her cheeks as I begged for just a little more. I knew she had a beautiful voice, but this...this...

"Jesus," I whisper as she holds *nothing* back, her gorgeous voice bellowing through the speakers and echoing throughout the cabin. My entire body erupts in chills, an unbearable raw ache ripping through my chest and circulating throughout my body. The lyrics strike me like blows as she sings of fear, a fear of the strength of all-consuming love from a woman for a man.

Immobilized, I stop breathing entirely when she lifts her eyes and looks right at me, the most damning fucking thing she could do as she sings of love and devotion.

I only sing for the people I love.

Is she singing for me? *To me?*

Christ, please let it be the case.

Entranced, I commit every lyric to memory—which sounds more like a prayer coming from her than a personal truth. She bends the melody with expert precision, wringing her voice out the way it was meant to be heard while utterly and completely enchanting me.

If she never sang again, it would be a travesty of the worst kind, but I know without a doubt, I'll never forget this moment as long as I live.

Memories of us flood me as I choke on emotion, eyes stinging. I allow it all to happen, keeping my expression unguarded. Hot regret slides down my face, and I let her see it. I let her see everything she can draw from me as I re-live it all down to the second she left me.

As the song hits its crescendo, she closes her eyes and blows the roof off the house, taking what little breath I have left in me.

It's all I can do to keep myself upright at this point, and I sense heads are turning in my direction, straining to see my reaction. I can feel a few gazes reach me, but I can't tear my eyes away from her.

I'm so fucking gone. I can't think past going straight to her and bringing her back to the place we created before I fucked us up with youth, fear, and indecision.

The girl I fell in love with nearly two decades ago is standing right in front of me, gifting me with a rare glimpse of the part of her heart that's remained untainted by life, time, by *me*. A part of her that rings hopeful. A heart that once belonged to me.

Throat burning, I unravel before her.

She's mine. She has to be because my heart is hers and always has been. It's never been so clear.

I loved her then, soul-deep.

I love her now, perpetually.

Even with the dire need to act—to go to her—when I confess this to her, I want it to be solely our time without an audience. I want her truths as well, and I might not get the whole of it if I put her on the spot. As she releases the last of the lyrics and the song ends, the living room remains stunned silent until Peyton speaks up. “Oh...my...*dawd*.”

Laughter and cheers explode from the entirety of the family, and even from feet away, I can physically feel the love and adoration surrounding her. Whitney takes a little bow, a slight blush coating her cheeks as she holds out the microphone. “Who's next?”

“Who in the hell can possibly follow that, Sweet Pea?” Allen praises her with obvious pride giving her a side hug before clapping his hands. “Let’s eat!”

“But Gramps!” Gracie cries, “I didn’t get to sing!”

“You and everyone else will get their turn after we eat the roast beast,” Dad announces in his Grinchiest tone.

Trying desperately to reign myself in to join them, I swallow repeatedly as life resumes around me, and they scatter, heading toward the dining room. Gracie flanks Whitney on the way to the table. “Auntie Whit! You never sang like that before! That was *so good!*”

It’s when Whitney bends to thank her, embracing her with a kiss to the forehead, that I see the glimmer of the tiny tear stains on her cheeks. The sight of them guts me.

Releasing Gracie, Whitney glances over to me and smiles, tilting her head in motion for me to join her. I have no idea what I give her in return as she keeps her smile but averts her gaze while helping Ruby set the table.

I slide my hands in my sweats and stare on at her, feeling Serena’s eyes on me as she strolls past me toward the kitchen and pauses, Peyton’s sippy cup in hand.

“Just say it,” I speak up, my eyes trained on Whitney.

“Do I have to? All I ask is that you just take a second to think ___”

“I’ve had *seventeen years* of seconds to think about her,” I turn my head to face Serena, “I don’t need another fucking one.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



The motorcade takes off as I watch the cars head down the steep driveway one by one before turning in the direction of the den. Much to my dismay, the last three hours have been filled to the brim with activity.

Dinner was followed by more karaoke, and after, our tradition of opening one present each on Christmas Eve. Thankfully my mother had the foresight to get a present for Eli to open—which turned out to be a bit lackluster, a simple pack of white cotton T-shirts. Not at all seeming disappointed, he genuinely thanked her for them with a smile on his face, which further softened my heart.

As eventful as the night has been, it's been a living hell for me trying to keep myself in check as each hour passed. Anticipation built as Eli and I exchanged one raw and loaded look after another while the rest of the family bustled around us.

Said family safely on their way to church, I stand in wait at the front door in my robe, the same anticipation racing through me as the house remains eerily quiet.

“Eli?” I take a step toward the den just as my cell phone rattles in my pocket with an incoming text.

Eli: Meet me out back.

Heading into the den—my heart pounding twice as fast as my steps—I open the sliding glass door and walk onto the lit porch to see Eli standing in the middle of the backyard. He’s staring up at the moon, his back to me. Moving toward him, I’m stopped short when I see a hand-sized book on the railing of the porch, a large red bow covering most of it. Picking it up, I take the stairs toward him and stop on the bottom step as he speaks from where he stands.

“That was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever fucking heard,” he rasps out softly, turning to face me. The combination of the moon and porch cast him in enough light for me to make out the hopeful glint in his eyes. “Your voice...Whitney...Did you sing that for me?”

Swallowing, the answer burns a hole in my throat as I avert my gaze.

“Bee...please don’t look away. Tell me the truth.”

When I look back over to him, his eyes search mine. Even with several feet of space between us, it’s as if he’s standing right in front of me. All I can do is nod.

I move to take a step forward, and he shakes his head.

“Please don’t. I can’t seem to keep my hands to myself around you and...I really need to right now.” He swallows. “Just let me try to get this out, okay?”

I nod, and he exhales heavily. “Let’s start with this.”

Lifting his cell phone from his pocket, he taps a few keys, and a second later, my phone rattles. Opening the text, I see it’s a picture of a picture. Though a little grainy, I can clearly make out a beautiful couple huddling around a teenaged boy in a hospital bed. He’s hairless and grinning as though he doesn’t have a care in the world—but visibly ravaged by illness. It’s the crystal blue eyes that give it away, and my jaw goes slack.

“I was the poster child,” he says softly. “Leukemia.”

I gaze at the photo in shock, my eyes flying back to his as the gravity of what he’s confessing runs through me.

“I don’t remember much about my life in L.A. at all. I remember what our house looked like, a few childhood friends I rode bikes with. That we were well to do, that my parents

entertained a lot, and my father worked constantly. The rest of my significant memories took place in a hospital. I was diagnosed at eleven, plagued with sickness shortly after, and fought it for nearly eight horrific years.”

I stare on, disbelieving.

“I had to smile. I had to pretend the needles didn’t hurt. I had to be the happy kid with leukemia because my parents fell apart every single time I closed my eyes. They spent the entirety of my teens preparing for my inevitable death, fighting in hushed whispers until eventually, I believed it too.” He shakes his head and toes the snow-covered ground with a boot. “I can’t believe this is still so hard for me to talk about after all this time.”

I keep all budding words idle on my tongue, hoping my silent encouragement is enough to keep him talking.

“After my first round of treatment failed, it came back twice as hard. Even with the odds stacked against me—which were not good—my Dad refused them. He gave up his successful practice in L.A., sold our house, and moved us to North Carolina because he found a specialist here and was determined to give me the best chance of survival.” He swallows.

“When the doctors felt I was strong enough to take another round of treatment, I did another two-year stint in the hospital.” He slowly exhales again as I try to wrap my head around the words coming out of his mouth.

“It was a miserable existence because, at times, I knew I was only fighting for them. I was so tired, Whitney. So fucking tired. They were good parents, loving parents, I was lucky to have them. So for them, I fought. I fought, even when I wanted to let go, because I just knew if I lost, they wouldn’t survive it.

“I would love to tell you I had some good memories, but if there were, I can’t remember anything beyond the murky haze of being sick. When my friends started to die, my parents isolated me from the world, thinking it was best for my mental state. I don’t think they wanted me to know how sick I was. They became my only friends. I had no one else.” He slides his hands in his sweats. “I was so lonely I used to have conversations with ___”

“The moon,” I say softly, tears gliding down my cheeks as I remember his confession about the sky.

“It’s constantly there, but it’s archaic, turbulent, whimsical, vast, and everchanging, differentiating the days even if I’m looking out of the same window. The moon is my favorite companion.”

My heart splinters, more tears clouding my vision as he nods. It’s everything I can do to keep from going to him, but I remain where I stand.

“During the worst of it, my mother started to drink—*heavily*. I didn’t blame her, but I hated the way my father treated her as if she was weak. Over time, it was clear he’d lost respect for her. Eventually, it started to take a major toll on all of us. She showed up at the hospital a few times, demanding to speak to my doctors. It was a fucking shit show. At times she was a mean drunk.” He flicks his gaze to me, and I nod.

“There’s no cure for leukemia, there’s only remission, but after fighting so long, no part of me believed I would ever beat it. It was sort of ingrained in me that I would always be sick. The more time passed, the more I couldn’t at all identify with the blond kid who rode his bike down a sunny California street. That was somebody else’s life. As far as my mental state went, I was institutionalized.”

A sob escapes me as I furiously wipe at my tears.

His expression softens as he takes a step forward but stops himself. “I have to keep going, okay?”

I nod, furiously wiping my face.

“A few weeks after my nineteenth birthday, I had an appointment with my oncologist to get the results of my latest scan to determine if the treatment took. Miraculously, I’d completed my first semester at UNC. The day of the appointment, Dad and I were early. Dad was anxious, but all I remember thinking was that the scan *had to be clear* for *him*, for *Mom*. They’d suffered so much.” He cups the back of his neck. “While we were waiting, Dad got a call to pick up my mother. She was at a bar.”

He shakes his head.

“I saw it. I saw it, and I *felt* his anger. I was terrified for my mother. I begged him not to go, but he assured me he’d be back in time.”

He swallows, his eyes misting, and it’s all I can do to keep myself standing.

“My doctor got impatient waiting for them and finally left me in his office after giving me the news I was in remission. A few hours later, my parents finally showed up, but not for the appointment.”

“Oh, my God.”

“My Dad wasn’t a violent man, but I’m positive they were in a horrific fight when they crashed. It was a sunny day, not a cloud in the sky, no adverse weather conditions.” His voice is guttural when he speaks. “After all their sacrifices, my remission was the one gift I could give them to possibly salvage their relationship, maybe save my mother from herself, and they died on the way to get the news.”

I stare on at him, obliterated.

“They spent half of *my life* worrying if I would die, only to leave me first. I couldn’t understand any of it. There was no reason in the world for me to move on. Nothing made sense. I fucking hated *the gift* of life given to me and the way it taunted and tortured us all—me especially after they died. By the end of the first year, I was getting stronger, day by day, but every single day was hard both physically and mentally for a very, very long time. The amount of chemicals I had pumped into me—it was just...*hard*. But in my mind,” he looks up at me, “it was *always* coming back. It was a given and just a matter of when.”

He takes another step toward me.

“After regaining some strength my first year at UNC, I went a little crazy my sophomore and junior year. I drank, I partied, but no matter how hard I tried to blend in, I couldn’t relate to *anyone* because I was so far behind the norm. I tried out for track junior year and, by surprise, made the team. Instead of embracing it, I put myself through the paces. It was like I was taunting my illness to try to outrace its shadow, but anxiety reared its ugly head and I couldn’t compete. It was the noise that got to me the most. Every loud bang was the collapse of the hospital bed rails.

Every crowd I landed myself into became a haze of doctors and nurses hovering above me. A majority of my attacks were debilitating, and I couldn't deal, so I quit track. By senior year, I managed to ditch the self-sabotage and started to try and take care of the *gift* I was given. But it was the fear instilled in me that kept me from taking any real chances."

In between anger and tempted to fling myself at him, I shake my head. If I thought our breakup hurt, it was nothing compared to the knife's edge of the words pouring out of his mouth. Empathy and ache fill the entirety of my body as he looks through me, his face solemn as if he's trapped in that time while telling it.

"I was finally getting strong enough to start thriving, a word so foreign to me I had no idea what it could feel like. My health had greatly improved by senior year, but that was short-lived because my mental health was deteriorating. I'd spent two years outrunning what happened, avoiding it, my anxiety ramping up because I wasn't numbing so much. I'd found a pathetic sort of stride and convinced myself that my routine was close to living." He looks over to me. "And then *you* crash-landed into my life."

His lips lift in a faint smile. "I knew, the minute, hell, *the second* that I saw you, something good had finally happened to *me*."

I cover my mouth, doing my best not to ugly cry and falter.

"Bee, please don't. Please don't."

"I'm not," I say furiously wiping my eyes. "N-n-no fuck that, it's impossible, *sorry*. You can't come at me with this and expect me to be okay. *I. Am. Not. Okay.* P-please don't stop."

"Okay..." he clears his throat. "With you, I sort of played into the Casanova thing because I couldn't deal with what happened. It was like coming out of a horrific murky war into a clear day. It's impossible to explain the mind space I was in. But I didn't tell a soul. Not a soul. I didn't want that life to be the one I had—and outside of being sick—I had no idea who I was."

"So much makes sense now. Jesus, Eli, this is why you got irrationally angry when you got sick and refused to let me take care of you?"

He nods. “I was pissed at my body, that my parents’ death seemed cruel and senseless, at *everything*—and at times, I took it out on you. It wasn’t fair, so when I felt that way, I retreated. Fuck, I hate this...”

“You can tell me.”

“I know,” he swallows, “still isn’t easy. It took a hundred hours of therapy to get here. But you...you,” he shakes his head. “You gave me a reason to smile again without forcing it. School, running, and my routine were all background noise, something I did to get by until the next scan. My eyes were always on the clock. I felt sentenced—like I was just waiting. But you...” he smiles again, and my chest constricts. “You gave me something to look forward to. But I was still battling it. I was still so far in my head. Not only that...it was hard for me to give you what you needed emotionally...and at times, it was hard *physically*.”

He scoffs bitterly. “Along with the other fun side effects of recovering from rounds of chemo, I was blessed with occasional ED. My junk wouldn’t function properly for years, fucking *years* after my last round of treatment. There I was, supposed to be at my sexual peak, and I couldn’t get it up at times for my drop-dead gorgeous girlfriend.”

I gawk at him as the pieces begin to click.

“I know what you might’ve thought, but you were so fucking wrong, and I didn’t correct you. The truth is, *I wanted you* twenty-four seven. Every minute of every day, but my body refused to grant me the privilege of acting on it—even after all the misery it had already put me through. Even with that curveball from hell, I was feeling better physically, but I just couldn’t get there mentally. It was always coming back. My time was running out.” He blows out a breath. “And while I loved your demanding nature, you had expectations. So many expectations. It was written in your DNA. The cruel part was—in my mind—I wasn’t going to live long enough to try. Even years into remission, I fully believed it was coming back. That combined with the fact that I was sterile by age twelve, I couldn’t stop robbing you of the dreams I saw in your eyes.”

“Eli—” I choke.

“Whitney, you were ready, so ready to start your life, and I was still just surviving.” He exhales again, running a hand through his hair. “You and I weren’t anywhere near the same place. So, when you took that pregnancy test...I made the decision to end it then and did it in a cruel way to deserve your anger. I thought it would be easier for you.”

Anger and understanding war in my chest as I think of all the times he let me feel rejected. He reads it easily.

“I couldn’t tell you. You wouldn’t have left me, and I needed you to because you were the only thing that kept me from bottoming out. I had to bottom out Whitney. I had to bottom out to decide to live and get the help I needed. For me, not for anyone else, for *me*.” His stare bores into me. “I didn’t tell you because you wouldn’t have left me, Whitney.”

I grapple with his reasoning, knowing it’s the truth.

“I know how selfish that is. The way you looked at me, fuck...it made me feel like I was *superhuman*, and after being sick half my life, that look meant *everything* to me. I lived for it. I clung to it like a lifeline.” He pauses, his voice filled with the emotion shining in his eyes. “I wanted to be the man you saw. I would’ve given anything to be him for you.”

Concern mars his beautiful face as I slip into a shuddering puddle of tears. His voice is filled with gravel when he speaks.

“Burying my parents was hard but pushing you away and watching you leave was just as painful. As much as I missed you, to me, we couldn’t have a future because I didn’t have one. I considered you my first love and tried to keep it in that respective drawer. Until one day, I decided to live. As the days and months passed, then months became a year, and then two, and the scans kept coming back clear, reaching out became a foolish notion. Like...how could you possibly think of me that way after so much time apart? But it didn’t matter because I carried you with me anyway, and every single year on my birthday,” he nods toward the book in my hand, “open it.”

Hand shaking, I untie the ribbon, the porch light enough to read the cover—Whitney’s Birthday Bucket List. Flipping the hard cover, I gape as I scan through the first few photos in the book. The first picture is of Eli and an instructor skydiving, both

with thumbs up, a tropical-looking ocean behind them on the horizon. The second page is an image of Eli's freshly-inked tattoo, two distinct heartbeats, a dotted line between them. I flip more pages as my vision again blurs. Eli taking a selfie while standing at the finish line of The Boston Marathon, his run time on the clock behind him. Eli standing on The Great Wall of China. I flip through each page, mind completely blown.

"You did *all* of them?"

"All but two," he admits softly. "I stopped last year when I caught up to your age. I think secretly, I always hoped we would do the last of them *together*. It just didn't feel right carrying on anymore. The irony is, that list was the only thing you left behind. In a way, your list saved me. Your goals became my goals. I've spent every birthday since we broke up—with *you*."

I shake my head in disbelief.

"When I got restless in Chicago to the point I knew I needed change, all I could think of was moving back here, to North Carolina. When I realized Brenden was your brother—shortly after we started working together—and saw that picture, Jesus Christ, talk about being struck by lightning."

He shakes his head as if dazed. "Finding out you never married or had children...God, that fucked me up. I couldn't figure it out...I was almost angry at you for it, but then I remembered one important thing."

He takes another step toward me.

"I hadn't either. I hadn't done any part of what I thought I would deny you, *either*. It's so obvious to me now why I didn't. Why I haven't given my whole heart to any other woman as completely as I did you." He fists his hands at his side. "You were, *are*, the *love* of my *life*, Whitney Collins."

"Eli, I, I," my voice shakes, and my lips tremble as words fail me.

"I was so thankful for whatever brought me back to your door, if for no other reason than to tell you in person that I'm sorry. That being with you impacted me in ways I could never forget you, that it changed me. I'm not telling you this to try to guilt you into forgiving me, because I saw that you did, tonight when you sang for me. I felt it. Am I wrong?"

“No.”

He takes long strides toward me, closing the space.

“I loved you,” he declares, the intensity in his eyes enough to knock the breath out of me. When he reaches me, he thrusts his hands into my hair. Cupping the back of my head, he lingers, his lips a breath away. “I loved you so much. I was crazy fucking in love with you.” He strokes my face with gentle thumbs, “and I don’t think I ever fell out.” A soft sob escapes me as he brushes the running tears from my cheeks.

“I loved you too...but you know that,” I sniff.

“I did, Bee...I knew. I’m so sorry I made it so hard.” I grip his wrists as he tenderly strokes my face. “Please, Whitney, can I kis—”

“You’re already wasting time,” I murmur before he eats the space up and sweeps me into his kiss. A moan escapes me when he slides his tongue across the seam of my lips, and I open for him, his tongue delving without hesitation as he feeds. He draws me into him, clutching me as if both our lives depend on it.

“Jesus, Bee,” Eli whispers as he unravels my robe and palms my back, lifting me slightly so I can better receive his kiss.

Eyes stinging with tears, completely enraptured, I take everything he gives greedily as our mouths sync into an effortless rhythm that feeds every part of my starving heart. This kiss is recognition and reigniting, just as his presence has been since the second he got here. He kisses me for endless minutes as if everything he wants to say is behind it, and I can feel it—his wordless declarations, and I return them one by one. He wants me. He wants me now, who I am now. When he pulls away, his eyes are glazed, and I burn his expression into memory.

“It hurt like hell when I let you go. I can’t regret ending us, but please don’t think it’s because I wanted to. I *had to*, Whitney. I *had to* for both our sakes. I don’t think we would have made it then, which made the decision the right one at the time. I’d be lying though if I told you letting you walk away didn’t rip my fucking heart out. I missed you so much. I felt like I lost half of myself.” He rubs my tears away. “If you let me back in. If you’ll let me...” his voice grows hoarse, “if you let me back in, Whitney—”

“You were never out.”

His eyes close briefly, the most beautiful, most serene smile gracing his lips.

“I was a fool to let you go, but I—Jesus, Whitney, fuck *then*, I want you now. I want to know whatever I don’t. I want to try this again as the man I *am*, not the terrified boy I was. I’ll do whatever you want if it means feeling this way again because, with anyone else, I’ve never fucking come close.”

“Me neither,” I confess with a sniff.

“I’m terrified to fail you, but I want this, want you.”

“Me too.”

His features twist with relief as he slides his thumbs along my cheeks. “I’m sorry for the way I’ve talked to—”

I shake my head in his hands. “I needed it. I needed to hear it. I feel like...in a way...it feels like you brought me back to life.”

He kisses me again and again, erasing all space and the time between us. Kiss intensifying, his erection brushes my stomach as I clutch him to me, our cold noses touching as I practically climb him. Somehow, he manages to sweep me off my feet onto the frozen ground to straddle him. We break, breathless, as he tugs at my shirt to expose my neck, his sporadic kisses becoming more urgent.

In mere seconds, we go feral, our touches growing carnal, our thirsts combining.

“Jesus, I’ve never been so hard in my life,” he groans. “But we’ll take this as slow as you want to, I swear, Whitney,” he murmurs, his kiss drifting to my jawline before he latches onto my neck. When I start grinding on him, he lifts his hips to meet mine, his methodic strokes hitting my clit expertly.

“Eli,” I rasp out as my pulse skyrockets away, inhibitions strapped to its back.

“I know.”

Our bodies move naturally, creating the most delicious and agonizing friction. Already soaked, I feel the jerk of his cock as I thrust my hips against his movement. He pulls back, watching my

expression in the dim light, his glacier eyes flaring before he blows out a ragged breath. “Your family—”

I lick along his bottom lip. “Is in church for the next hour and a half. *Minimum.*”

“Church is that long? Thank God,” he whispers.

“It is tonight, and in this instance, you literally can.”

Our laughter gets cut short by our moans, and I pull away.

“I need...you,” I declare, getting completely lost in the hard lines of his body, the scruff of his jaw, his smell. “Eli, please.”

He pulls away abruptly, searching my eyes. “Bee—”

“Right now,” I demand, rubbing myself along his rock-hard length.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Once you let me in this way, I won’t be able to let you go. I need you to hear me. I won’t survive it twice.”

The decision hangs in the air between us. Sex is still emotional for Eli—at least it is with me.

“Yes, to everything you’re thinking,” he whispers. “Yes, Whitney, it’s you.”

“Then let’s not waste any more time,” I say.

He gathers me in his arms, charging toward the house as I latch onto his neck.

CHAPTER FORTY



Moonlight cloaks the expanse of the room as Eli sets me in front of the glass door. He presses a slow kiss to my lips before tugging one into his mouth, his murmur barely perceptible. “Bare?”

“Hell yes,” I reply raggedly before our mouths again collide.

Kiss. “Should,” kiss, “we,” kiss, “go up to your room?”

“Eli, we’re wasting time.”

He chuckles against my mouth. “Demanding as ever, and I’m going to start making that time up to you right now.”

“Stop talking,” I say, gripping his cock through his sweatpants.

“Fuck,” he breathes.

“Don’t tease,” I scold as he slides his hand into my pajama pants and panties. He stills, interrupting our kiss, grinning against my lips as he runs his fingers against the landing strip of trimmed curls.

“You kept my strip.” He makes another intoxicating pass with his finger. “I love this.”

“Yeah, you mentioned it.”

“When?”

“Doesn’t matter, read the vagina, Welch.”

He chuckles before his fingers begin to explore. “So soft,” he plunges cold fingers into me, and I gasp out at the feel. “So fucking sexy,” he whispers as I begin to move my hips frantically for more friction while he massages my clit against his palm.

Just as I go to demand more, he sweeps me off my elf slippers, my legs wrapping around his waist. Our lips remain close as he murmurs soft praises between kisses, his arms encasing me as he lays me on the mattress and undresses me.

Once naked, he lifts, and I fumble with his sweatpants, getting them down mid-thigh before diving for his cock, surrounding the fat tip with my lips. Licking the tender underside first, I meet his eyes as he stutters out a, “fuuuuccck.”

“Speaking of things we missed,” I take him to the back of my throat and suck hard before releasing him with a pop. He traces my face reverently with his fingers as I part my own over his crown before tightening them down his length to the base—long, thick, veiny perfection. When I go in again, he jerks his head and gently tugs my hand away before nestling between my legs.

“Eli,” I moan as he runs his fingers through my soaked sex a second before he lines us up.

“You’re right. We’re wasting time.” Forearms propped on either side of me, we lock eyes as he slowly begins to press into me.

“Jesus, fuck, fuck...fuck...” Eli gasps as he stretches me with his girth, and I arch my back at the invasion. Palming my thigh, he spreads me further before slamming the rest of himself into me in one smooth thrust. The strength of his groan matches my cry as he draws back, eyes flaring. Needing more friction, I begin to move with him, and he presses me into the mattress, his hips pinning me.

“Oh,” thrust, “my,” thrust, “God,” thrust, thrust, thrust, “Eli.”

“Jesus, Whitney,” he murmurs as he burrows in deeper, lifting my leg to wrap around his hip and planting our clasped hands next to my head.

Orders die on my tongue as he delivers on every one without prompt while I hold on for dear life. His chest bounces

uncontrollably with fast breaths that hit my ears as I hold onto him, frantically grappling for any semblance of the woman I was mere minutes ago. Batting the fear aside, I allow myself to get lost as he frantically pumps into me, filling me again and again. We share breath as our kisses get sloppy, urgent. Our movements become jerky, completely unrehearsed as we're overcome with the desperate need to get closer.

“Eli,” I warn.

“I’m there,” he counters as we both begin to fly toward the edge.

The sheer force of emotion in my chest combined with his movements steals my ability to speak as he plunges into me, and I crest over. The pulse of his orgasm extends my bliss for endless seconds. After what seems like a mere second of recovery, Eli lifts and kisses me breathless before murmuring. “Now that’s out of the way...” His fingers travel south—as do his lips—as his eyes light with blue fire. “It’s so fucking on.”



Stamina. Stamina. Stamina. Stamina. Stamina.

The man has upped his game.

If it’s possible to go out tonight due to death by orgasm, I’m cool with it.

Count? I have no idea.

Palms braced on his muscular thighs, Eli spreads them wider, my back to his chest, one hand palming my throat, keeping me locked to him as the other massages my clit. He pumps his thick cock in and out of me in measured strokes from beneath as I climb.

“Made for me,” he whispers heatedly, “for *me*,” he declares, increasing his pace as I bounce on his girth once again on the verge.

“Eliiiii, I’m—”

“I know,” he whispers, with a hint of smug amusement, “I can feel you tightening around me because you fit *me*. Now,” he whispers, flicking my clit like he’s plucking the perfect note, “*give it up.*” Body shuddering, I pulse around him as he turns my head, delivering his kiss, tongue first. I suck on it feverishly, going limp in his arms, and I can feel his smile against my ear when I go lax against him.

“You done playing?”

“Mmmm,” is the only reply I can muster as Eli flips me to all fours on the mattress, gripping the back of my neck before burying himself to the hilt. His name spills from me as he begins to fuck me ruthlessly. Arching my back, I match his thrusts taking him deeper.

“You’re so perfect,” he murmurs, his hands gripping my hips as he pistons his own. We’ve spent our time wisely, going from tender lovemaking to filthy fucking and back again, delivering on the heated promises we’ve been making with our eyes, and I. Can’t. Get. Enough.

“Coming again, Bee?” he whispers as I crest over, squeezing him as his beautiful inches hit me perfectly, riding me again past satiation. Feeling him harden further, I know he’s close, and he stops suddenly and dips, kissing the small of my back as he pulls out of me before gently turning me over.

“I don’t want it to end,” he whispers, running a gentle thumb up and down my landing strip before lowering it to massage my clit.

“Eli—”

“There’s so much I want to do to you, with you. I can’t fucking wait,” he breathes. “How long do we have?”

“Twenty minutes, tops.”

“Shit,” he dips and briefly sucks my clit before slowly pressing his cock back into me. The second I begin to move my hips, he grips and stills them.

“Hell no, I’m fucking you.” He drives the point home by pinning my wrists above my head and thrusting into me, *hard*.

Eyes hooded, he gazes down at me, his whispers filthy, as I memorize the look of his toned body, which is bathed in the

moonlight—the corded muscle of his shoulders, the flex of his pecs as he works his hips.

He’s mine. Mine. Mine to admire, mine to lust after. Mine to love.

I read his expression and see the same possessiveness in his gaze.

“Yours,” I murmur. His eyes close as he increases his speed, and I know it was that word that set him off. When I again get lost in the skilled roll of his hips, in his naked form, he grips my chin.

“Look at me,” he commands, “watch me come.” He thrusts in, once, twice, and his lips part as he pulses inside of me. A long groan pours out of his throat as I topple over with him, clenching around him and taking every drop.

Exhales hitting my dampened skin, he gazes down at me as he pulls out slowly, and I wince. “Sore?” He flashes me a wicked grin. “Want me to lick it better?”

“Still so dirty,” I murmur, stroking his shoulders with my palms.

“You tainted me,” he says, tracing his finger around my nipple, “stole my innocence.”

“Well, wherever your sexual imagination came from, it wasn’t me.”

“Inspired by *you*,” he smiles as his eyes trail down my body and back up. When he pauses his finger, I look up to see his expression softening as his eyes implore. “Whitney, I want you to come home with me after Christmas. I want to know everything I don’t. I’ll do whatever it takes to make this work. We don’t live that far apart.” He laces our fingers. “Will you consider it?”

“Yes,” I say, not being able to think of a single reason why not as I squeeze his hand. “So much has changed...I’m still reeling.” I catch the lock of hair cresting over his brow and thread it back into his thick mane. He catches my hand as I withdraw it and kisses my palm.

“Were you thinking about our first time the other night?”

“You know I was. I’ll be replaying our whole relationship differently.”

“I know, and I’ll answer anything you want to ask.” He presses a reassuring kiss to my lips. “I promise.”

Drawing my nipple into his mouth, he reaches down and grabs his phone from the floor. Nipple peaking, I ready myself for another round just as he pulls back, a flash of blue light filling the room before he springs from the mattress.

“Shit! It’s *one-thirty*! We so did *not* have twenty minutes!” His entire demeanor shifts as he begins to dress frantically, his leg halfway in his pants as he tosses a finger toward the doorway. “Baby, you gotta go!”

“What?” I laugh, raising to my elbows, dazed, and drunk on orgasms. “Why?”

“*Why?* Your entire family is about to pull up! Shit, we’ve got like five minutes, tops.” He pulls his head through the neck of his T-shirt and pauses. “Text your sister and see how close they are.” He perks his ears and stills. “Is that a car?” His eyes flit to mine. “Whitney! Get dressed!”

“It’s not like they’re going to come in here. They’ll probably head straight to bed.”

“You *don’t know* that!” He says, his face filled with panic.

“Okay, okay, I’m going.” I slide my panties on and pull on my pajamas as he sniffs the air like a cartoon dog. “Oh my God. It smells like straight-up fucking in here!”

He scrambles out of the den and into the kitchen as my laughter follows him while I pull on my shirt. Eli comes back in, unloading a can of Pledge, his trigger finger happy as he clouds the room with it, some of the spray hitting my mouth.

“Eli!” I screech, waving the cloud away from me. “You think they’re going to believe we’ve been *dusting* at one-thirty in the morning?”

“Shit.” He immediately stops spraying, fear in his eyes. “What covers up the smell of Pledge?”

“Nothing,” I laugh as he cants his head to the side. “Is that a car? Is that them?!”

“No,” I chuckle as he looks at me sternly and points his finger toward the living room. “Leave, immediately.”

“What is *wrong* with you?”

“I don’t want them to know!” The boom in his voice has me jumping. “Wait,” he grips my wrist. “I have an idea.”

He races back into the kitchen and rushes back in, a rag in his hand as he holds it out to me. “Dust.”

“What?”

“Dust, go dust,” he orders, “or pretend to,” he waves his hand dismissively before turning me toward the doorway, his palms on my shoulders. “You’re thoughtful like that. It’s not so far-fetched. When your Mom comes in, pretend you’re tidying up for her. It’s believable. I’ll play like I’m asleep.”

“Have you lost your mind?” I toss over my shoulder.

“Yes. And it’s your pussy’s fault. Now go.”

“I am not dusting, Eli.”

“Please, don’t argue with me right now,” he whimpers. “I don’t want your Dad to know that while he was worshiping his lord and savior, I was defiling his daughter. Please just...dust.”

I try to stop and turn back to him, but he continues to push me out of the room, my elf slippers sliding on the hardwood.

When I’m a safe distance away from the den, he releases me, and I look back at him. “Their opinion really matters to you, doesn’t it?”

“I want my place at the table.”

“What?”

“I don’t have time to explain!” He screeches.

“Are you having a panic attack?” I ask, concerned.

“I will be if you don’t start dusting!”

His eyes bulge. “I know I’m acting like a lunatic, but I do care. I care *a lot*.”

“Okay,” I say, trying my hardest not to laugh and failing. “Crazy ass man.”

“Crazy about you,” he says before turning and darting back into the den.

“Well, our relationship is off to a great start,” I call out, shaking my head and buffing the table next to the couch. “You just kicked me out of bed after sex, and now you’re ordering me around like the help.”

“Special circumstances,” he fires back, “I’ll make it up to you.”

I hear the rustling behind me, knowing Eli is fluffing his sheets before he flips the switch to put more air in the mattress. The motor cuts off a minute later, and the house goes eerily quiet until...

“Whitney,” Eli whisper shouts from the mattress as if we aren’t alone in the house.

“Yes?”

“That was fire.”

“Thanks?” I say, unable to help my laugh.

I can feel his smile even though I can’t see it.

“I’m already hard for you again... Was that a car?”

“No.”

Another pause.

“Oh, shit, Whit. Fix your hair!”

“What?”

“Fix your Mufasa hair!” He belts out in panic. “Or Peyton will point it out!”

“My God, fine.” Hastily, I run my fingers through my hair and double-check my clothes. The man is making me paranoid. Not that I want my parents to know I just had more orgasms than I have toes. I tighten my robe cringing at the thought. Yeah, no.

“And fix your clothes,” he orders from the darkened room.

“I just did. Eli, go to sleep.”

“I can’t. My room reeks of lemon polish. I can hardly breathe. Keep dusting.”

I hang my head as another bout of laughter escapes me.

“It’s not funny,” he whispers. “Is *that* a car?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“No.”

“Whitney?”

“Yes?”

“Please keep dusting, and make it look convincing, okay? I know I’m acting crazy, but I *love* your family. I really do. I’ve fallen in love with them, and I don’t want to lose their respect.”

His desperation-laced tone tugs at my heart. “Okay.”

“Promise? Remember, I have to work with your brother, and I want to be able to look Allen in the eye tomorrow.”

“I promise you they’ve all fallen for you, too,” I assure him, “and I’m pretty sure they both have had sex, but I’ll make them believers in the one a.m. polish, only for you, baby. And because that sex *was* fire.”

A pause.

“Like...on a scale of what?”

“You did not just ask me that,” I shake my head with a grin.

“Just want to make sure my girl is happy.”

“An easy hundred out of ten,” I say.

“Good to know...I’ve never had sex in a girlfriend’s parent’s house before.”

“That’s pretty obvious. And it really shouldn’t be a regular occurrence considering your age at present.”

“I’m feeling a little dirty and...a little vulnerable if I’m honest.”

“You don’t say?” I press my lips together as his innocence tugs at my heart. The fact that he’s still inexperienced in certain things is just another reason to let myself fall again. “You know, Eli, I can just go up to bed, and they can wonder why the house smells like polish.”

Silence...then. "They'll know. They'll know it's *sex* polish."

I palm my forehead as the cars start to pull up, and I whisper-shout, "Yes, they're here," before he gets a chance to ask.

"Bee?" He calls, his whisper lower as the car doors close.

"Yeah?" I say, pulling a few frames off the shelf in an attempt to sell it.

"I'm going to make you so happy. I promise you. Merry Christmas."

Here we go again, heart, be good to us.

The front door opens a second later as I greet my family with a rag in hand, a beaming heart, and matching smile. "Merry Christmas."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



The stomping of the herd down the stairs was quickly followed by the pop of champagne. Dad freely poured into flutes, handing me one as I joined them downstairs after a long, hot shower.

The kids raided their unopened presents from Rudolph as the rest of us congregated around them. Taking my first sip of champagne, I feel Eli's eyes on me. We exchange a long look that does little to ease the tension in his shoulders. We haven't spoken privately since last night, and I can tell he's worried about me regretting my decision. I want to go to him and ease his fears—to tell him I'm not at all second-guessing my decision to give us another try. Our breakup did a number on me, and it's going to take time. It's not like I can change the cautious stripes I've grown into overnight. He will have to earn my trust while I learn to trust my feelings *and his*.

I flash him a genuine smile, and his lips slowly lift as we go telepathic. He speaks first.

Just checking to make sure you don't regret it.

Not a minute, sir. I'll prove it when we're alone later.

Relief covers his features as I smile into my glass.

Content, I divert my attention to my squealing nieces and nephews.

“What’s this?” Gracie asks, walking over to an Elf on a shelf perched on the dining room table. Next to it sits three huge gift tags attached to long ribbons that seem to have no end. She picks up one of the tags and reads it.

I look over to Mom, knowing this is something right up her alley, and she shakes her head. I dart my gaze over at Serena, who shakes her head in similar denial, just as clueless.

“What does it say?” I ask Gracie.

“It says ‘Gracie, follow me,’” she giggles. “There’s one for Peyton and Conner, too.”

Conner races toward the table, and Peyton slowly approaches at Thatch’s urging. Gracie passes out the tags and immediately begins following hers as she zig-zags around the room where the ribbon seems to be wrapped around dining chairs—no end of it in sight.

Curious, I set my glass down and go to help as Peyton immediately starts yanking on his own ribbon. Giggling, Conner, and Gracie begin to follow theirs as well—which leads them into the kitchen.

I glance over my shoulder to see Eli, Thatch, and Brenden sharing knowing grins. Ahhh, the culprits.

Intrigued, I follow Peyton, and when we turn the corner, I gawk. The kitchen is covered in three distinct colors of ribbon, which are strung intricately throughout, their paths different. Peyton and I continue to follow our designated path as I unhitch the ribbon, which has been looped loosely around the cabinet handles.

Conner and Gracie giggle hysterically as they follow their own paths in a zig-zag pattern from room to room.

Peyton’s ribbon leads us in and out of my parent’s bedroom before disappearing beneath the runner rugs of the hallway and back to the front door—where Gracie stands now, before opening it. “Oh my God!”

Excitedly, Conner joins her at her side. “Oh my God.”

“Oh my dawd,” Peyton repeats as the three of them shriek, staring in awe as each of their ribbons end in bows attached to

three shiny new bikes. Peyton turns to Thatch. “Bike, Da da, bike! Mine?”

“Yeah, buddy,” Thatch chuckles as he opens the door, and the three of them race to their new wheels. Thatch lifts Peyton onto a flame-decorated tricycle as Serena joins me at the door, the sparkle in her eyes accompanying the new diamond on her hand as she stares fondly after Thatch. All three kids’ faces are lit with ecstatic smiles as Thatch rings the bell on Conner’s bike, doing his best to cater to each of them

“Whose idea was this?” Serena asks. “So awesome!”

“Right?” Brenden chuckles behind us as he glances out at the three of them.

“Did you do this?” I ask.

“We all did,” he nods over his shoulder, “but it was Eli’s idea.”

I glance behind me to see Eli staring out of the glass door, his glacier blues lit with mirth at the kid’s reactions.

“Fantastic!” Mom says with a laugh from her recliner. “So well done, kid.”

“Rudolph for the win,” Brenden nudges Eli as we crowd the door.

“Wow,” I say, looking over at him, fingers itching to touch. From his reaction last night, it seems he wants to keep us a secret for the moment. Hell, it’s been mere hours since we recoupled. I wrestle with the urge to touch and the indecision to act. I lift a brow in question, and he gives me a wink.

I send my telepathy back out to him, and he presses his lips together and averts his eyes, giving me a busy signal.

Gah, is he waiting for *me* to make it?

Just do it, Whitney! Put yourself out there. Love him freely for the first time in your life. He’s right fucking there!

“You’re awesome,” I say softly, opting for a compliment for the moment. Brenden cuts through our eye contact as he grabs the kid’s coats and glances back at Erin and my parents in the living room.

“I have a feeling we’ll be out here for a while,” he says, taking a step out.

“Take your time. We’ll do stockings,” Serena replies as we congregate back into the living room. Dad orders Alexa to play Christmas music as Serena, Mom, and I sip our champagne, and Eli tosses more logs onto the fire.

“All right,” Serena says, passing out our stockings while a mix of kid squeals and parent scorns sound from the driveway.

We all start to unpack our oversized socks. I begin to unload mine in my lap, seeing Mom’s annual butterscotch Life Saver storybook fall out first—which has me grinning. It’s when the Brach’s Christmas tree taffy falls into my lap, followed by an orange, that my eyes water. I lift the fruit eye level, tears clouding my vision as I blink them away, nostalgia hitting my chest with a hard thud.

It’s as if Grammy P is in the room with us. I blink another tear away as Serena sounds out next to me. “Gah, I miss her.”

Her voice is filled with the same emotion I feel as she looks over to Mom and lifts the tree candy. “I can hardly ever find these in the store anymore. Where did you get them?”

Mom eyes us both, confusion on her features as she looks between us, her own orange in hand. “You two didn’t do this?”

I glance over to Serena and draw my brows as Serena shakes her head. “No, I didn’t.”

“Neither did I,” Ruby says softly, looking between us, “then, who?”

We all turn to Dad.

“Dad?” I ask.

“Wasn’t me, Sweet Pea.”

Standing next to the fireplace, Eli clears his throat and shoves his hands in his jeans. “Whitney told me when we dated that Grammy P used to put oranges and Brach’s tree candy in your stockings. I checked and didn’t see any in there, so I—”

He doesn’t get a chance to finish because I climb him like a tree, tears stinging my eyes before I kiss the ever-loving hell out of him.

Surprised, he lifts me into his arms and kisses me back fully, his hands on the sides of my face. With my elf slippers hooked around his waist, I pepper his jaw with kisses, knowing everyone is watching but can't bring myself to give a shit. I pull away, elated, and beam at him. "You totally Family Stoned us."

He smiles. "That's a good thing, right?"

"Meh, I mean, yeah, I guess... Maybe I'll keep you around for a while."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I whisper, kissing him again before tossing a glance over my shoulder to see tears in Serena's eyes just as my parents clink champagne flutes.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



I wake in Whitney's twin bed, her blonde hair askew, obstructing my view of her face. She's wrapped around me, her naked thigh hitched over my torso, possessively keeping me close to her—not that we have a spare inch of room. I revel in the feel of her surrounding me and know there's not a chance in hell I'll want to wake up another day without this. We have a future, and it started last night. So much to look forward to, so much to make up for. Nothing about the ideas I have brewing for us feels rushed.

It feels as if our hearts agreed on the other all those years ago. My errant path and struggle with anxiety and depression were the only thing to keep us from living the decision. We grew up apart instead. We became who we became and found each other after the fact, or rather, I found her, much like she found me the first time—by fortunate accident. There's a lot to be said for that.

Pushing away her hair selfishly for a view, I find a peaceful expression and do nothing to stifle the words that so easily spill from my lips. Pacing be damned.

"I love you," I whisper. "I'm going to give you everything. So much more than you're expecting," I murmur to her temple as I slide my palm down her back. "I'm going to make sure you know exactly who your soulmate is." She doesn't so much as stir at my spoken dreams, no doubt due to exhaustion.

I spent the bulk of the night making love to her before things got a little filthy. We've wasted no time making up for our separation, our bodies easily molding together as if remembering the other.

Glancing behind Whitney, I chuckle at Raggedy Ann and Andy, who are huddled together in the corner, facing the wall. Something Whitney insisted on doing before she sank to her knees last night and looked up at me with eyes filled with desire while pulling my pajama pants and boxers down.

After a solid minute of teasing while fisting me in her hand, she finally took me in her mouth, moaning as if *she* was the one deriving pleasure from the act.

The woman has upped her game.

After several minutes of torturous foreplay, I finally gripped the back of her head, forcing her to take me down her throat. Her reaction? Another order disguised in a moan. "Fuck my mouth."

It took mere seconds of witnessing her stretched lips to lose myself as she beckoned my orgasm before sucking down every last drop. I rewarded her with a nasty dose of rugburn. From then on, things went very unholy, and I found myself muffling her moans as I fought to hold back, so we didn't wake the house. Tonight, she'll be in my bed. God help her. I'm already making plans.

Until then...I look forward to our drive to Charlotte together, to her endless chatter, to begging her to sing for me, and making New Year's plans.

Ignoring my raging hard-on, I gaze on at her, my heart starting to pump faster as I soak in her gorgeous face. Feeling rejuvenated despite my lack of sleep, I ease away from her, knowing I still have an hour or so until Peyton wakes. Out of respect, I still want to maintain a courting type of atmosphere, so Allen and Ruby don't suspect I've had my wicked way with her under their roof.

After dressing, I softly close the attic door and hit the stairs, pausing when I hear commotion on the other side of a guestroom door.

"Jesus, baby," Thatch groans.

“Watch me, *King*,” Serena orders heatedly as I haul ass down the stairs doing everything I can to stifle my laugh while knowing I’ll never unhear that.

Once out the front door, I stretch in the driveway, looking up at the darkened sky, my eyes finding the fading moon. Briefly, my mind drifts back to a time when I spoke to it like a confidant while lying in a hospital bed, my hand freezing from the unforgiving liquid pumping through the IV.

“I got her back,” I whisper softly as the freezing wind rustles through the trees. “If you in any way had a hand in that, thank you.” The garage door startles me and whines as it starts to open. Alarmed, I turn to see Ruby appear, clouds of smoke billowing out around her like she’s leaving a lit fire inside. Ruby scours her surroundings, her eyes finding mine quickly before a devilish smile lights up her face.

“Nothing like a good wake and bake, kid,” she says shamelessly before making her way toward me. As she nears, she laughs at whatever expression I’m wearing and shakes her head. “That Wayne from the deli is something else. It kills me Serena thinks I’m clueless to the fact that while I’m ordering a half-pound of turkey meat, she’s discretely ordering a quarter of his finest herb. I’ve been mooching from those two for *years*. Call me crazy, but it was well deserved after the week I’ve had. Don’t knock it until you try it. It may help with your anxiety.”

“You didn’t miss *anything*, did you?”

“Of course not. I *created* those humans. Between worrying about my clueless son screwing up his marriage due to ambition. Thatch and Serena reaching a scary crossroads in their marriage and my Sweet Pea denying herself the affection she so richly deserves from a worthy man—my nerves were fraying pretty badly.” She looks at me with clear affection. “I was struggling with what to do until my new ally came along, and I saw what he was capable of. Nice touch getting season tickets to Tennessee games for Brenden to gift Erin. A great way to tell her they’re moving back home. Surprisingly, the only thing that girl loves more than my son and her children—is football.”

“How did you know that was me?”

“He’s not that kind of magician.” She nudges me. “But you are, aren’t you?”

“I figured it out, you know,” I grin, “the cotton shirts. *Eli Whitney*, the inventor of the Cotton Gin, you were giving me your blessing.”

She smiles broadly. “I knew you would get it. I’ve been waiting for another intuitive to grace this family for quite some time. My father was, and I am. Somehow it skipped a generation, but that’s where you come in.” She puts a hand on my shoulder. “We’re going to have so much fun together, handsome.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” I look back toward the sky. “You know, I can’t really talk about crazy. I was just having a chat with the moon.”

She nods as if it’s the most natural thing in the world to admit as she searches the sky and finds it.

“So that guy is a friend of yours?”

I nod. “I was sick when I was young, cancer, and spent long stints in the hospital. When a close friend of mine died, my parents sheltered me to the point of unhealthy isolation. The moon sort of became my only friend.”

“Well, that makes sense. It’s got one hell of a gravitational pull, which has you fitting right in with *us*.”

She pulls me into her embrace, hugging me tightly to her. Emotion clogs my throat as I hug her back for several seconds. Maternal warmth surrounds me, a feeling I haven’t had in endless years.

When she pulls away, she beams up at me. “Welcome to the family, Eli.”

EPILOGUE



Ten days later...

Lova: I'll be there when you get home. Kick ass today.

Don't forget the habanero zauce and Pledge.

Lova: Ha ha. See you soon, beautiful.

Giddy, I tuck my phone into my purse and exit the warmed leather seat of my sparkling new SUV. I plant my matching red Jimmy Choo's on the floor of the parking garage, feeling every bit the bad bitch as I strut away, chirping it locked behind me.

With pep in my step, I stride out of the elevator in a new sheath dress my serendipitous lova picked out for me during our week together.

The best week of my existence.

From the minute we left Triple Falls, we started to make little plans with big meanings.

For now, we're going to do the long-distance thing so Eli can keep his promise to help Brenden migrate back to Nashville. After they're sorted, we're going to figure out where to go from there. Though Eli's being tight-lipped about it, I'm positive he's

coming to Nashville not only to see me but to case the place. He's mentioned more than once that he will do whatever it takes to make us work, and I have no doubt he will. Even though our living situation is unsorted, we've got an idea of what we want.

We made a new birthday bucket list on New Year's Eve that included both travel plans and goals. Every night, I fell asleep on his chest, exhausted and sated. Waking up in his arms every morning felt like Christmas.

Striding past reception, I see Jared and Wes lift their brows as I whiz past, tempted to Fried Green Tomato their asses with a 'face it boys, I'm older and have more insurance,' but decide not to give them the time of day. Instead, I head toward my office, where Sophie and Zoe stand in wait, their heads whipping in my direction when they spot me, their collective eyes widening.

The three of us collide in afterglow, with smile-filled greetings and enthusiastic hellos.

"Who's first?" I ask.

"You," Sophie says. "Girl, what happened? When I didn't hear back from you, I got worried. But, from the looks of it, you had one hell of a Christmas vacation."

"Oh, I did," I assure her, beaming.

"And does this vacation have a name?"

"He does. Eli."

"Well, you look amazing," Sophie says.

"You're one to talk. Is that a tan line?" I ask.

"Yeah, you're not going to believe what went down after our first night."

"I have an idea. I got the pictures," I say with a laugh.

"I've got so much to tell you," Sophie says.

"Same."

"And you," I turn to Zoe and catch the new sparkle coming from her hand.

"Oh, wow, Zoe," I gawk at her newly occupied ring finger. "He proposed?"

“Yeah,” she beams. “It was a total surprise.”

“It’s beautiful. Congrats.”

“Thank you.”

We all start talking at once just as Rich barks out my name, striding down the hall toward us.

“Lunch,” Sophie whispers, “on me. I’ll message you both.”

We quickly agree before Zoe hits her desk outside my door, and I head into my office. Rich follows. “You’re looking well, Whitney.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m feeling well. Did you have a good Christmas?”

“I did, thank you. Are you still working on that jingle for the Morton account?”

“Actually, sir, the Morton account now belongs to Stuart.”

“Well, I see no reason you two can’t—”

“Actually, sir, I’ve been meaning to talk with you about that. Honestly, that’s far above and beyond my job description.”

His bushy brows draw.

“While I value my position here, Rich, truly, I do, I have no intentions of that being ongoing if my efforts are going to continue to be overlooked. The Morton account belongs to your new Senior VP. You’ll have to get with him on that.”

“I see.”

“I’ve thought long and hard about it over the holidays, and I’ll be honest, I believe I deserved that promotion—and I think you know that.”

“I had to make a hard decision, Whitney.”

“To be frank, your decision is going to make things hard for this firm because he cannot invest the time I could have.”

“Could have?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve decided to invest more time outside of the office, an investment I deem worthy, but I assure you I’ll be giving you everything you’ve come to expect during *regular* business hours.” His face beets red as I cross my arms and lean

against my desk. “Stuart set a good precedent for family first, don’t you think?”

“If it’s a matter of—”

“It’s a matter of priorities—and mine have changed. Really, Rich, I’m not vying for more money or a pat on the back. It’s just that recently I’ve been reminded of my worth.”

You can shut the fuck up now, Collins. Pride won’t pay the mortgage.

“I’m sorry you don’t feel valued.”

“Oh, I do.” *Just not by you.* The insinuation rings clear. “Was there anything else you needed from me?”

Rich clears his throat, indignant about his dismissal. “No.”

He lingers at my office door as I round my desk and take a seat behind my monitor. Out of my peripheral, I can see him stalling as his wheels begin to turn. His unease about me stepping back only confirms that he fully expected me to come back and continue to work the insane hours I have been—including the workload for Stuart and me. *Without* the title and pay increase.

Asshole.

Rich pokes his head back in my office. “Er-Whitney.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Let’s set a meeting. I’m happy to compensate you for any outside help with the Morton account.”

“Happy to, sir.”



Eleven months and two weeks later...

“One more time,” I say as she bats my hand away from the volume knob.

“No, Jesus, I’m starting to hate it.”

“Your smile says otherwise.” I grin over at her as she sinks a little in her seat, her cheeks pinking but not with embarrassment—with pride. I live for that blush. I live for her.

“It’s just *one* song.”

“A song you wrote and produced that’s getting a shit load of airplay. My Bee is a songwriter.”

“With a very short resume,” she says with a head shake—not a hint of ego to be found. Fuck how I love and respect her for it. She wrote Lunar Love on one of our weekend trips and managed to get it in the right hands through a contact at her agency. It’s all been uphill since, and I have zero doubts she’ll sell more. Her talent is astounding and is no longer being overlooked.

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” I say, taking her hand and kissing the back of it, my other gripping the wheel.

“Thank you,” she murmurs. “But I won’t quit my day job just yet.”

“In a year, you’ll be eating those words, mark mine.”

Three months after Christmas, Brenden landed a few accounts that allowed him to expand and open a branch in Nashville. Shortly after—and with my help—he hired capable hands to run the Charlotte office, so he didn’t have to commute so much. A month after that, I moved into Whitney’s condo in

Nashville. My fortieth year has been the best year of my life, and from the look of things, it's only going to get better.

I turn onto the steep driveway and park as Whitney glances over at the cabin where her family waits inside.

“So much has happened since last year,” she says softly. “*So much.*”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Because *you made it* happen.”

“Because you pushed me to.” Her eyes shine with affection as she looks over to me.

“Uh, hate to break it to you, baby, but there's not a soul alive that can make *you do* anything.”

She smirks. “Are you saying I'm still a handful?”

“Fuck yes,” I reply without missing a beat. “But I think it's time I let you in on a secret.”

“Yeah? What's that?”

I unzip my jacket and start to unbutton my shirt as she laughs nervously and glances back at the cabin.

“Babe, I'm all for getting you naked, but we just pulled up. Think you can make it a few more hours?”

Grinning, I pull back my shirt—revealing my tattoo—and grab her hand, holding it between mine.

“I told you the reason for the two pulses.”

She nods, her eyes softening. “One beat for each of your parents.”

“To keep me going. To remember that they sacrificed so much just to give me a chance of having my own life.” Lifting her hand, I pluck her pointer finger and press it to the start of the ink on my chest. “Have you ever noticed anything about the line in between the pulses?”

She studies the ... between the two deeply etched beats.

“That it's dotted, not solid?”

“Yeah, dotted, kind of like the trail a cartoon bee would look like on paper.”

Her lips part as I begin to slowly trace the tattoo on my chest.

“If you feel that what you’ve accomplished this year has anything to do with my love and encouragement—I’m okay with that—as long as you realize I need yours just as much to reach my own potential. I don’t see it as a weakness. I see it as *our* strength. I think there are certain people that come into our lives capable of doing that for us. I can tell you with the utmost certainty that I’m the man I am because of you, because of your love, because of what you saw in me when I couldn’t see anything but that sick kid in the hospital bed when I looked in the mirror.”

Tears fill her eyes.

“Even when we were apart, I kept you with me. The day I got this tattoo, I was at my lowest point. We’d been broken up for a while, but I knew after your exit that I had to make some changes. I had to finally deal with my anxiety and grief.” I trace her finger over the first pulse point. “I knew the only way to truly deal with it would mean getting *through* it.”

Pressing the pad of her finger to the first dotted line, I lean in. “At the darkest time of my life, you were the one thing that reminded me that it was still worth living, and it was the memory of you that kept me going. It was you who was with me every step of the way. If I’ve done anything in my life worth something since we met, it was because of what you saw and what you see.” I swallow as I try not to let my emotions choke me up. “You told me last year when you pulled up to this house—”

“I was at my lowest,” she says, “and in a way, you brought me back to life.”

“I love that about us, Whitney. Sure, we can do fine on our own, but we’re better together. That’s who we are to each other, baby. Whatever you want to call it, fate, kismet, divine intervention, whatever it is that brought us together, that’s what makes us special. We were miles and years apart, but it never left us—and for me, that makes us the definition of—”

“Soul mates,” she says softly, “we’re soul mates, Eli,” she repeats the word as my eyes sting with emotion. I nod and pull out the box.

“You’ve been my source of gravity since the second I laid eyes on you, and I want to be yours for the rest of our lives. You

have me, heart and soul. Whitney, will you marry me?"

Tears stream down her cheeks as she flies across the console and into my arms with a "Yes, yes, yes!"

Hugging her to me, I lift my thumb at her back. A second later, reflective light beams into the SUV, lighting up the cabin of the car. Whitney tenses in my arms.

"Oh my God!" Happy tears trailing down her cheeks, she pulls away, looking out of the windows of the car. Every single tree surrounding the cabin drips with solid white light. The cabin itself is lit from the foundation to the roof.

"Oh my, God. It's so beautiful." She turns to me, beaming. "You lit up the whole damn mountain for me!"

I can't help my smile. "I would take a bullet in the ass for you."

"Huh?" She laughs at my word choice.

"Let's just say I'm not going anywhere. No matter what."

"I can't wait to marry you," she murmurs.

"Do you think you might want the ring?"

"Oh, yeah," she says, holding her hand up between us. I pull the diamond out of the box and push the ring on her finger.

"It's beautiful." She says without seeing it, and fuck if I don't love her more for it. It wouldn't matter if it were plastic. But it's far from it. I see the second she truly gauges it. "Jesus. Eli, it's... *wow*."

"Like it?"

"It's perfect. You're perfect. I love you." Gripping my face, my diamond on her finger, she leans in, and I meet her halfway, capturing her lips. Tongues tangling, I fill her mouth with as much affection as my kiss will allow. Her answering moan vibrates on my tongue just as a knock sounds on her passenger window. We ignore it until Brenden's shitty British accent breaks through our kiss.

"Pardon me, but would you have any Grey Poupon?"

"Brenden," Erin scolds from next to him, her belly swollen with our incoming nephew.

“What? She’s in advertising. I thought she’d appreciate it.”

“This is a serious moment. Don’t ruin it for them.”

Giggling, Whitney looks over to see the entirety of her family crowding my SUV.

“You better have said yes, sis,” Brenden snarks, “you’re close to old maid status.”

“That there is why I’m going to be best man,” Thatch speaks up from next to him.

“You so are not, *dick*. I’ll be the best man.”

“No dick, Uncie Brenden,” Peyton scolds before sounding out. “*Pee-nis*.”

“Peyton!” Gracie admonishes. “That’s a bad word too.”

“Only for you,” Thatch chimes in with a father’s warning.

“We are so going to Vegas for the bachelor party,” Brenden announces.

“Over my dead body,” Serena chimes in while smacking the window lightly. “Open up, Whit. I’m dying!”

“Your dead body can be arranged,” Brenden assures dryly.

“Brenden, I think it’s time you know that you are the worst brother in the history of *ever*.”

“Oh my God, it’s finally happened.” Brenden fakes a sniff. “I’ve been working toward that title my whole life. First, I would like to thank the academy—oww! Shit, Serena!”

“Uncie Eli,” Peyton barks from somewhere between them. “Come out!”

Wyatt wiggles in Conner’s arms as she stands back from the rest of the group, shaking her head. Such a smart girl.

“Auntie Whit,” Gracie says through a mouthful of braces, shielding her eyes and peering into the window. “Hurry up so I can see the ring!”

“It’s freezing out here,” Brenden whines.

“Eli!” Peyton barks again, and I grin. My little man, ever the bossy one.

Whitney shakes her head as the ramblings continue.

“What is taking so long?” Gracie asks.

“Would you two please. Get. Out. Of. The. Car!”

“Serena,” Thatch scolds. “Maybe they want a moment alone.”

“I can’t see shit with these lights blinding me,” Dad says as Whitney and I shake with laughter.

Another knock sounds. “Whitney, this is your father. I’m not getting any younger, Sweet Pea. Come on out of the car.” Allen peers in, his hands covering his eyes to block the blinding white lights.

Whitney shakes her head and looks back over to me, her smile breathtaking. “We’re eloping. You hear me? We. Are. Eloping.”

“Whatever you want, Bee,” I say with a chuckle.

“And we’re not sleeping here tonight,” she says heatedly.

“Fuck no,” I whisper. “I’ve got us a room ready. I’m going to do things to my fiancée tonight that will have us *both* on Rudolph’s naughty list.”

“Fiancée,” she sighs. “We’re getting married.”

“Yeah, baby,” I lift her hand and kiss her ring, “if we ever get out of the car.”

“I love you so much, Eli.”

“I know.”

“Arrogant,” she sniffs.

“Confident,” I say. “*In us.*” She kisses my palm and presses it to her cheek.

“I’m so happy.”

“That’s all I want.”

Past Whitney’s shoulder, I see Ruby standing alone on the porch, her hands on the railing, her smile a mile wide as her family continues to batter my SUV.

“Ready?” I ask Whitney.

“Absolutely. Let’s do this,” she replies just before I unlock the doors.

THE END

KATE – “ALEXA, WISH MY READERS A VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS!”

ALEXA – “HERE IS SOMETHING I FOUND ON THE WEB—” 🤪



RECIPE FOR SNOWMAN SOUP

A packet and a half of hot chocolate mix made with milk

3 Hershey's Kisses

2 packages mini candy canes - crushed

A handful of mini marshmallows

Stir all ingredients, including (1) crushed candy cane, until kisses are melted. Top with whipped cream and sprinkle the second crushed candy cane.

Enjoy!

XO



Curious about Mr. Geasy Hands? Start my sultry mechanic's love story in *Flock*.

Prologue

I GREW UP SICK.

Let me clarify. I grew up believing that real love stories include a martyr or demand great sacrifice to be worthy.

My favorite books, love songs, movies, the ones that resonated with me, have kept me grieving long after I turned the last page, the notes faded out, or the credits rolled.

Because of that, I believed it, because I *made* myself believe it, and I bred the most masochistic of romantic hearts, which resulted in my illness.

When I lived this story, my own twisted fairy tale, it was unbeknownst to me at the time because I was young and naïve. I gave into temptation and fed that beating beast, which grew thirstier with every slash, every strike, every blow.

That's the novelty of fiction versus reality. You can't re-live your own love story because, by the time you've realized you're living it, it's over. At least that was the case for me.

All these years later, I'm convinced I willed my story into existence due to my illness.

And *all* were punished.

That's why I'm here, to feed, to grieve, and maybe to cure my sickness. It's here that it started and it's here where I have to end it.

It's a ghost town, this place that haunts me, this place that made me. A few weeks shy of my nineteenth birthday, my mother had sent me to take up residence with my father, a man I'd previously only spent a few summers with when I was much younger. Upon my arrival, I'd quickly learned that his stance hadn't changed on his biological obligation, and he doled out the same rules as he had when I was small—to rarely be seen and never heard. I was to uphold myself to the strictest of morals and excel in school while executing his standard of living.

In the months that followed, a prisoner of his kingdom, I naturally did the opposite, ruining myself, and further tarnishing his name.

Back then, I had zero regrets, at least when it came to my father until I was forced to deal with the aftermath.

Now at twenty-six, I'm still living in it.

It's clear to me that I'll never outgrow Triple Falls or outlive the time I spent there. After years of fighting it, this is the conclusion I've drawn. I'm a different person now, but I was before I left too. When everything happened, I was determined I'd never return. But the infuriating truth I've discovered is that I'll never be able to move on. It's the reason I'm back. To make peace with my fate.

I can no longer disregard the greedy demand of the vessel beating in my chest or the nagging of my subconscious. I'll never be a woman capable of letting go, of leaving the past where it belongs, no matter how much I want to.

Navigating my way through the winding roads, I roll down my window, welcoming the cold. I need to numb. Since I hit the highway, my mind has been reeling with memories I've desperately tried to suppress during waking hours since I fled.

It's my dreams that refuse to set me free, my dreams that keep the war raging in my head, the loss shredding my heart,

forcing me to re-live the hardest parts, over and over in an agonizing loop.

For years, I've tried to convince myself that life exists after love.

And maybe it does, for others, but life hasn't been so kind to me.

I'm done pretending I didn't leave the largest part of me between these hills and valleys, between the sea of trees that hold my secrets.

Even with the cold whip of the wind on my face, I can still feel the warmth of the sun on my skin. I can still sense his frame blocking out the light, feel the prickling of surety the first time he touched me, and the goosebumps that touch left in his wake.

I can still feel them all, my boys of summer.

All of us are to blame for what happened—all of us serving our sentences. We were careless and reckless, thinking our youth made us indestructible, exempt from our sins, and it cost us.

Snow drifts toward my windshield in a lazy fall, dusting the trees and covering the surrounding ground as I exit the highway. The crunch of my tires in the gravel has my heart pounding in my throat as my hands start to shake. I sweep the endless evergreens lining the road while trying to convince myself that facing my past head-on is the first step in confronting what's plagued me for years. All I have left is dwelling within the prison I've built. It's the truth I'm determined to face that's the most definite, the most crippling.

Most consider knowing all-consuming love a blessing, but I consider it a curse. A curse I'll never be able to lift. I'll never know love again as I did here all those years ago. And I don't want to. I can't. I'm still sick with it.

There is no question in my mind that for me, it was love.

What other pull could be so strong? What other feeling could addict me to the point of insanity? Of doing the things I did and living with these memories within this ghost story.

Even when I'd sensed the danger, I gave in.

I didn't heed a single warning. I went in a willing captive. I let love rule and ruin me. I played my part, eyes wide open, tempting fate until it delivered.

There was never going to be an escape.

Stopped at the first light at the edge of town, I press my head against the steering wheel and inhale calming breaths, hating the fact that I'm still so powerless to the emotions this trip has stirred within me, even as the woman I've become.

Exhaling, I glance back at the bag that I tossed in the backseat after my decision mere hours ago. I thumb my engagement ring, rotating it on my finger as another stab of guilt runs through me. All hope of the future I spent years building was lost the minute I ended my relationship. He'd refused to take the ring, and I have yet to take it off. It hangs heavy, a lie on my finger. The time I spent here before has caused another casualty, one of many.

I was engaged to a man capable of keeping his vows, a man worthy of commitment, of unconditional love—a loyal man with a steadfast heart and warm spirit. And to him, I'd never been fair. I could never love him in the way a wife should love a husband.

He was a consolation, and accepting his proposal meant settling. One look at his face when I called off our upcoming nuptials let me know I had destroyed him with the truth.

The truth that I belong to another. That whatever remains of my heart, body, and soul belongs to a man who wants nothing to do with me.

It was the agony on my fiancé's face that aided to my breaking point. He'd given me his love, his devotion, and I'd thrown it away. I'd done to him what was done to me. Disobeying my heart, my master and monster had cost me Collin.

Minutes after I liberated us both, I packed a bag and left in search of more punishment. I drove straight through the night,

knowing there was no significance of time, that it doesn't matter. Nobody is waiting for me.

Well over six years have passed, and I'm back to square one, back to the life I fled, my feelings running rampant as I reason with myself that leaving Collin wasn't a mistake, but a necessary evil to free him from the lies I told. I'd wronged him making promises I could never keep, and there was no way I was making more, to love and cherish in both sickness and in health because I hadn't disclosed just how sick I am.

I never told him how I allowed myself to be used, ravaged, and at times debased to the point of depravity...and that I'd loved every second of it. I never told my fiancé how I'd bloodlet my heart—starved it—until it had no choice but to beat in a distinct rhythm that only matched the thrum of one other. In doing so, I'd sabotaged my chances of recognizing and accepting the kind of love that heals, rather than hurts. The only love I've ever known or craved is the kind that keeps me sick, sick with longing, sick with lust, sick with need, sick with grief. The distorted kind that leaves scars and jaded hearts.

If I can't grieve enough to cure myself in my time here, I'll remain sick. That will be my curse.

There may never be a happily ever after for me because I gave my chance away by becoming attuned to the dark parts. Accustomed because of the year I freed my inhibitions, reacting to rejection and pain and losing all moral sense of myself.

These are things you don't say aloud. These are the type of confessions women who command respect are never supposed to give voice to. Not ever.

But it's time to confess, to myself more so than any other, that I'd hindered my chance of a normal and healthy relationship because of the way I was built, and because of the men who built me.

At this point, I just want to make peace with who I am, no matter what ending I get.

The hardest part of all of this isn't the fiancé whose heart I broke. It's the knowledge that the one and only man my heart's ever been faithful to, I will never have.

Trepidation engulfs me as more memories surface. I can still smell him, feel the swell of him inside me, taste the drop of salt in his cum, see the satisfied look in his hooded eyes. I can still feel the unmistakable rush from the looks we shared, hear the rumble of his dark chuckle, feel the wholeness from his touch.

The closer I get, the more memories come crashing over me. My resolve to face what haunts me beginning to break away piece by jagged piece. Because I have some idea of what the true end looks like, and I can't escape it anymore.

There may be no cure, no moving on, but it's time to deal with unfinished business.

Let the ghost hunt begin.

Keep Reading [*Flock*](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author and Texas native, Kate Stewart, lives in North Carolina with her husband, Nick. Nestled within the Blue Ridge Mountains, Kate pens messy, sexy, angst-filled contemporary romance, as well as romantic comedy and erotic suspense.

Kate's title, *Drive*, was named one of the best romances of 2017 by The New York Daily News and Huffington Post. *Drive* was also a finalist in the Goodreads Choice awards for best contemporary romance of 2017. The Ravenhood Trilogy, consisting of *Flock*, *Exodus*, and *The Finish Line*, has become an international bestseller and reader favorite. Her holiday release, *The Plight Before Christmas*, ranked #6 on Amazon's Top 100. Kate's works have been featured in *USA TODAY*, *BuzzFeed*, *The New York Daily News*, *Huffington Post* and translated into a dozen languages.

Kate is a lover of all things '80s and '90s, especially John Hughes films and rap. She dabbles a little in photography, can knit a simple stitch scarf for necessity, and on occasion, does very well at whiskey.

Other titles available now by Kate

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Romantic Dramedy

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THANK YOU

First and foremost, a HUGE THANK YOU to my READERS for making this year the most unforgettable and best of my career! I can't thank you enough for the shoutouts, for showing my books so much love. It's been such an amazing journey, and I'm forever grateful. It's very easy to surmise I have the BEST readers on the planet. For those in my group, your posts and bottomless support during this year have been incredibly overwhelming in the absolute best way!

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