

A warm, inviting living room scene. In the foreground, a Christmas tree is decorated with red ornaments featuring white snowflake patterns and a red and white striped candy cane. The background shows a fireplace with a bright, crackling fire, creating a warm and cozy atmosphere. The overall lighting is soft and golden, typical of a winter evening.

Untouchable Kate

RUTH
CARDELLO

New York Times Bestselling Author

Untouchable Kate

Ruth Cardello

Author Contact

website: RuthCardello.com

email: ruthcardello@gmail.com

Facebook: [Author Ruth Cardello](#)

Twitter: [RuthieCardello](#)

Brock

Untouchable Kate has always been that to me, but I just found a bold letter she wrote to Santa.

I've always been the good guy—successful, responsible, kind—but too easy to dismiss.

And nice wasn't what she asked Santa for.

Kate is freshly divorced and mourning the death of her mother. She needs a friend, not a lover.

But what if I could be both?

What if I could give her the fantasy she craves while winning her heart?

If I do this well enough, she'll forgive a few lies . . .

Kate

It's been a tough year. When I wrote the letter to Santa, I was angry.

Okay, maybe I shouldn't have asked him for anything as graphic as I did, but I didn't mail the letter. I stopped myself before going that far.

But I did drop it.

Now someone is sending me naughty packages with detailed, hot suggestions.

He says he's the Head Elf in charge of fulfilling my type of request.

I can't believe I'm doing what he tells me to . . .and liking it.

This might be exactly what I need to get out of my funk.

At least, until our game begins to involve Brock—a man who has always been nice to me.

I can't use Brock that way.

I won't.

I'm torn between a delicious fantasy and a chance for something real.

Note from the author: This storyline was originally published as novellas (12 Days of Temptation and Be my Temptation) in my Temptation Series, but the story has been reimagined. Caution: This story has a higher heat level than my other books and reading it may land you on Santa's naughty list.

Copyright

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This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, events, business establishments or locales is entirely coincidental.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the fabulous women in my life who keep encouraging me to explore my naughtier side. My husband thanks you. I hope my readers do too.

The Author's note to Santa

Dear Santa,

I understand if this gains me coal in my stocking. I'll be good next year. I promise.

Sincerely,

Ruthie

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CHAPTER ONE

The Drop

Brock

“HEY, YOU DROPPED something,” I called to the tall blonde who’d just walked past, after giving me the same polite smile she’d been flashing me since our teens. A moment earlier, she’d stopped near a mailbox, paused as if debating whether or not to mail a letter, then fumbled with her purse and kept walking. I noticed that, instead of ending up back in her purse, the letter had fallen beside the mailbox. I picked it up and was about to chase after her when I saw the letter was addressed to Santa Claus.

It wasn’t surprising Kate hadn’t heard me when I’d called out to her. Even though I was a well-known businessman in Misty Falls, having expanded my father’s home construction company into a much more lucrative mill renovation business, I had somehow become invisible to Kate.

It hadn’t always been that way.

Twenty years earlier, back when there’d been talk of Boston’s commuter rail expanding down into Rhode Island, Kate’s mother had purchased a large Victorian home in the north end of Misty Falls. That section of town had always been one of my favorites. Hundred-year-old elms lined streets where wealthy factory owners had once built elaborate turn-of-the-century homes. Kate’s mother had purchased one of those houses and hired my father to bring it back to its old glory.

The first time I met Kate I was ten and she was eight. My father had dragged me to work sites whenever I was home from school, and Kate’s mother had commuted to Boston and

left her under the supervision of an inattentive teenage babysitter. We had been two children with nothing to do but get to know each other while my father worked on her mother's house.

She'd asked me why I always looked dirty. Didn't I bathe?

I'd asked her why she always wore a dress. Where was the fun in that?

For her, I started brushing my hair.

For me, she'd worn jeans.

The two of us had spent that first summer climbing every tree in the neighborhood and getting thrown out of almost everyone's yard. We'd frequently picnicked in Old Man Mabry's shed that he'd built to look like a log cabin. We'd made ourselves sick eating too many half-ripened cherries from Mrs. Landry's cherry tree. We had even visited with old Miss Jacobs—a woman so lonely she opened her door every morning and invited in all of the loose neighborhood dogs for tea and biscuits. We'd dared each other to stroll in as if we'd belonged there and to sit right down beside canines of all sizes and breeds. Although neither of us had been brave enough to sample the treats, we'd enjoyed ourselves enough to return two more times that summer.

Summer had ended and so had Dad's work on the Hale home—bringing a swift end to our friendship. Kate went on to attend exclusive private schools and I attended public schools and worked for Dad in my spare time. Our paths had crossed now and then, but over time her smiles had become less warm. As she grew from a shy child into a beautiful woman, it became more and more obvious that Kate didn't belong in that town.

She was tall and graceful, like a ballerina, with classically delicate features, dark blue eyes, and long blonde hair that was always neatly styled. Even back in high school, she'd dressed with casual sophistication. I heard she'd taken figure skating, music, and language lessons. No one knew her very well. Her

mother had kept her separate from the local children, as if none of us were good enough to play with her little girl.

After high school, Kate had gone off to study music in Boston, then married a wealthy attorney there. No one had expected to see her again. When her mother had died four months ago, I had been one of the few who had attended the wake. I doubted Kate remembered seeing me there, but I'd thought about her almost every day since. She'd stood beside her mother's casket, still strikingly beautiful, but alone. I hadn't been surprised to hear she'd left her husband soon after that.

I turned the envelope over in my hand, studying it. Kate didn't have a child. As far as I knew, she lived alone in her mother's old Victorian.

Why would a woman like Untouchable Kate write to a mythical childhood character?

The answer was none of my business. I told myself to post it, then remembered how she'd wavered and changed her mind. What could she have written in that letter that would give her second thoughts about sending it?

I knew I should return it to her unopened and explain I'd seen her drop it. That would be the right thing to do. Instead, I placed the envelope in the inside breast pocket of my suit and walked inside Molly's Cafe. Dad was seated in his usual booth in the far corner of the restaurant, already sipping a coffee. I slid into the seat across from him.

"You'll have a wait, Brock. The waitresses are still huddled over there talking about that Hale woman being back in town."

"I'm sure they're not."

"Whatever the topic, they apparently consider it more important than refilling my cup. I don't understand their fascination with someone who doesn't give one whit about this town. She was just in here, and do you know who she spoke to? No one. Probably thinks she's too good to lower herself to

our level. No wonder her husband left her. I can't imagine spending much time with a woman that cold."

I glanced out the window, half hoping to catch a glimpse of a woman I knew was long gone. "You don't know her, Dad."

"Oh?" His father's eyebrows shot up. "And you do?"

"No," I said, and raised a hand to flag one of the waitresses over. "But you raised me to look beyond the surface of buildings and people. We don't know what brought her back here."

My seventy-three-year-old father rolled his eyes. "Maybe you don't, but the rest of the town does. It's all anyone talks about."

"Since when do you care what anyone says about anything?"

The waitress came over and took my order, momentarily delaying Dad's response. Once we were alone again, he took another swig of coffee and said, "You did this to me. You told me to retire, and now I'm sitting here gossiping with the town cronies. I should come back to work part-time."

"Dad, the doctor said you need to take it easy on your heart."

"What's easy about fighting with everyone about local politics? Do you know what they want to do with the monument near the park? They want to replace it with a red light. Men gave their lives in battle for our freedom, but a few fender benders, because your generation can't drive, and they call the monument a hazard. I'll tell you what's a hazard—forgetting what people sacrificed for this country. All you young people can do is text on your smarty-pants phones and crash into each other. I almost got myself arrested yesterday when some young asshole politician came in here and claimed he was moving the city forward. I asked him what he thought of the monument, and he didn't know what I was talking about. Moving us forward, my ass. How can he do that if he

doesn't know what's happening in the city he wants to run? I told him that too."

I sighed. "Okay, Dad, you can come to the office a couple mornings each week. Help Sue input the billing information."

"I don't want to work inside. I spent my life outside. So did you, until you started working on those mill projects. Now look at you, going to the gym. In my day, we earned our muscles the old-fashioned way—by lifting things. I didn't prance around in tight shorts, running on machines that took me nowhere."

That was an image I didn't need in my head. "I work hard, Dad. Foster Developments turns down projects, we're in such high demand."

My father grunted in disapproval. "Foster Developments. What was wrong with Foster and Son?"

"It sounded too local. Too small. I explained that to you."

"I don't know who you're trying to impress, son. Everything you need is right here in this town. Trying to be more than you are just leads to trouble. Your little friend Kate learned that the hard way."

Our food arrived. For a few minutes we ate in comfortable silence. "Is Aunt Stella still coming for Christmas?"

Dad laid his fork beside his plate and made a pained sound. "Yes. She arrives tomorrow. I'll give you your inheritance early if you tell your mother you need me in the office every day."

I hid a smile behind my coffee mug. "That bad?"

"Don't laugh. One day you'll be me, Brock. What would you want your son to do for you?"

"I don't see children in my future, Dad. I'm too busy. I don't have time for anything serious."

"It'll happen, Brock. When you least expect it. And you'll be happier for it."

“Like you?”

“I didn’t say I’m not happy. I love your mother more than I love life itself. But that doesn’t mean I can spend the next two weeks in a house with her and her sister as they reminisce about their childhood and play Christmas music until I get homicidal. Save me so I don’t kill the woman I love.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll tell Mom you’re essential to the success of a project I’m working on. Maybe you can give the outside of the building a face-lift or something.”

I paid for breakfast and left Dad there, sipping on what he said was decaf coffee, arguing with the man in the next booth about which day of the week was best for trash pickup. Stopping beside my truck, I took out the letter Kate had dropped.

She might have been delivering it for a child. Didn’t many letters to Santa end up in the hands of organizations who answered them? I vaguely remembered reading an article on that once. I decided to open it. Hell, if the child had provided an address and asked for something simple, I might even buy the requested gift and have it delivered.

It was, after all, almost Christmas.

I hopped into my truck, started the engine, and studied the still-sealed envelope. My breath was visible in the cold morning air. It could be from Kate. Would a grown woman write a letter to Santa? And, if so, what would she ask for?

I considered myself an honest man with high moral standards.

But the letter—it was sheer temptation.

As was the woman who had dropped it.

In the privacy of my truck, I opened the envelope, careful not to tear it. Once I started reading what was written inside, I couldn’t stop.

When I reached the end, I shifted in the seat to accommodate my hard-on, then read the letter again.

CHAPTER TWO

The Letter

Dear Santa,

I hate you.

I know hate is a harsh word and that a lady never uses it, but my days of being proper are over.

I'm sure you recognize my handwriting. There can't be many twenty-eight-year-old women who still write to you.

You can thank my mother for that. When I stopped believing in you as an actual person, she held out that you were the spirit of hope and dreams. Each time I doubted you, she would retell the story of the year her family had nothing and you brought them food, clothing that fit, and shoes for each child.

Between you and me, your involvement in that was a crock of shit. We both know it was probably someone from her church who felt bad for her family.

When I think of all the time I wasted crafting the perfect letters to you just because it made my mother smile, I want to hunt you down and kick your red-velvet-covered ass. You never gave me what I asked for. You only sent a mockery of it.

Remember in high school when I asked for a boyfriend who would hold my hand and listen to me? What I got was a borderline stalker with hands so sweaty they felt like sponges. Sure, he wanted to hold my hand. He also wore the underwear he stole out of my gym bag. He said it was his way of staying close to me. Then he followed me all over town trying to explain why that was normal. I told him not to touch

me so often that I gained the nickname Untouchable Kate.

I didn't out him because ladies are above vindictiveness.

I guess I'm not a lady anymore, either, because I want to find him and beat his sorry ass too.

I wrote to you in college. I don't know why. I guess it made me feel closer to my mother, and I missed her. I was in such a hurry to grow up back then. My friends were all getting married. I asked you for a husband—and you sent Wayne Price.

Just like you, he was all show. He came from a good family, made the right amount of money, looked like one of the Kennedys, and said he loved me. I thought you had finally listened to me. When he asked me to marry him, I had no idea what a twisted sense of humor you have, Santa.

If you were going to send me a man who would sleep with every last one of my friends, couldn't you have at least made him good in bed? Is an orgasm here or there too much to ask for?

When Mom found out she was sick, I wasn't going to ask anything of you. I'd stopped believing in you long before that. But there we were last year, Mom and I, in a hospital room just before Christmas, and she wanted both of us to write to you. I didn't ask you to cure her. All I asked was for you to take away her pain.

I hate you more than I thought I was capable of hating anyone.

It's Christmastime again. If Mom were here she'd ask me to write to you. So here is your fucking Christmas letter.

Santa, if you are indeed real, I'm not looking for love anymore. You've thoroughly killed my belief in

happily ever after. I do, however, have a Christmas wish.

To help me get my mind off how much this time of year sucks, I'm asking for a good old-fashioned, down-and-dirty fucking. I want a man who knows his way around a woman's body. Give him a long tongue and a nice big cock, and make him strong enough to be able to fuck me against a wall.

He should not only know where a G-spot is, but what to do with it once he finds it. Someone who doesn't finish until I do. I don't give a shit who the man is or if I ever see him again. I want to come so many times I can't remember my name. That's what I want under my tree this year.

This is the last time I'll write to you.

Hating you in a most unladylike fashion,

Untouchable Kate

P.S. Fuck you

CHAPTER THREE

Tell Me I Didn't

Kate

I STEPPED OUT of my high heels as I entered my house, then threw my Burberry coat and purse on the couch. *What a day.*

In retrospect, I was glad I'd changed my mind about mailing the letter. I'd written it spontaneously and charged off to post it with an angry fervor. Luckily, sanity had returned in time. *I don't need to inflict my bitterness on whichever poor volunteer reads those letters.*

Pouring myself a glass of wine, I sank into the uncomfortable cushions of the couch. It was a beautiful antique my mother had loved, so I had tried to as well. But, like so much of Mom's views on the world, it didn't fit me.

I closed my eyes and told myself I'd do better the next day. Tomorrow, I'd pick myself up, dust myself off, and start looking for a job. Or a Realtor, if I decided not to stay in Rhode Island. So many decisions, and all of them would have to wait until my head stopped pounding every time I tried to make one.

Which will be tomorrow.

Or maybe the day after that.

Did it matter? I had enough money from Mom to coast for a bit. I could have gotten alimony from Wayne, but I wanted to sever all ties with him. I kept the jewelry he'd given me over the years, not because of the value—some of the pieces would have paid a normal person's rent for a year—but to remind me to never again be taken in by sparkle.

I opened my eyes and took a gulp of wine and tossed my cell phone on the coffee table in front of me. It had beeped, announcing a message, but I didn't want to listen to it. At best, it was my ex-friend Wendy trying to explain for the fourth time why having sex with Wayne shouldn't mean our friendship should end. I drained the wineglass and leaned forward to refill it. It might also be Wayne announcing the divorce papers were complete and ready to be signed. I wasn't in the mood for that conversation, either.

Why am I here? I could be sunning myself in the South of France. I could be drunk in Key Largo. Why did I think coming back to a town where I have no friends and now no family would be a good way to spend the holidays?

What the hell is here that I think I need?

If you're up there watching me, Mom, look away for the next three weeks. I'm not handling Christmas without you well. I promise to do better next year.

God, I wish I did drugs.

I made a face at the freshly poured second glass of wine. *I don't even like alcohol that much.*

I put the glass down on the coffee table and buried my face in my hands. *No wonder I couldn't keep Wayne satisfied—I don't have a single fun bone in my body. What did he say when I said no to a threesome? A man could have better nights alone with his hand than with me?*

I'd like to think I showed him by leaving him alone with that appendage—but I'm pretty sure he's with Wendy now. She's too dumb to understand that means we can't be friends anymore.

I placed kindling in the room's large marble fireplace and started searching through my purse for the letter I had every intention of burning. *I should have fucking thanked Santa for Wendy too. No, I suppose my poor taste in friends is my own damn fault.*

When I couldn't find the letter in my purse, I checked the pockets of my coat. Then I ran outside and scanned the interior of my car.

Oh, fuck me. Tell me I didn't mail that letter. No. No. I remember deciding not to and putting it in my purse.

Did I drop it? Oh, my God, I dropped it. What if someone reads it? Or, just as bad, mails it? With my luck someone will submit it to an editor of a newspaper just to screw with me. Yep, this town loves me as much as I love it.

I never should have signed it.

Fear over where my letter could have ended up was enough to send me back out into the cold to see if it was on the ground near the mailbox. Of course, it wasn't. That would have been too easy. Too kind.

Too much like anyone's life but mine.

I returned home, closed all the curtains in my bedroom, and pulled the covers over my head, even though it was still early in the day. Some days were so bad they *should* end at noon.

CHAPTER FOUR

An Opportunity of a Lifetime

Brock

I CARRIED KATE'S letter with me the entire day. I met with my subcontractors who were halfway through turning an old textile mill into luxury condos. They were right on schedule, and the news put me in a very good mood. Next year would be my company's best.

It was definitely a reason to celebrate. I thought about calling my friends. But many of them had families now and had to ask their spouses for permission to go out during the week. Poor saps.

I could call my parents, but I already had plans to see them over the weekend and too much time with them, even though I loved them, made me a little crazy. Especially because, since our conversation this morning, Dad was now hiding out at the main office with me, pointing out every change I'd made in the business.

Everything I considered doing paled in comparison to the one thing I really wanted: Kate Hale.

Every time I read her letter, I came close to charging over to her house and offering to fuck her as many times and in as many ways as she wanted. I didn't imagine that would go over well. Life tended not to mirror what would work in a porn movie.

Still, I'd wanted Kate for as long as I could remember. If I had a nickel for every time I'd masturbated while imagining her sucking my cock, I wouldn't have to work another day in my life.

God, I masturbate too much.

Sex for a man wasn't as simple as magazines made it sound. At least not for a man living in a small city where most people knew each other. By the time I found out if the woman shaved or not, she was telling her friends we were serious, and I was considered off the market well before I'd decided if I wanted to be.

In theory, I had nothing against relationships. One day, I'd meet a woman I wanted to wake up next to every morning, but for now, all I wanted was what Kate had described: a good old-fashioned, down-and-dirty fucking.

Unlike her, I was more particular about with whom. There was only one woman who could make me hard just by thinking about her. One woman I wanted so much I couldn't think about anything else.

That night, I read seven how-to articles online about giving a woman the best orgasm of her life. I watched a video about giving better oral sex, and just to be thorough, I read a romance novel my friends had joked portrayed every woman's fantasy sex.

Like Rocky preparing for a big fight, I readied myself for this challenge. It wasn't just about having Kate. I had to make her come so many times she couldn't remember her name. That would take skill.

When I woke up the next morning, I smiled into the mirror. I'd had the most delicious dream about Kate, and my subconscious had worked out the perfect way to get her into my bed.

You're a nice guy, Brock, but nice guys have nice sex.

This kind of opportunity comes along once in a lifetime.

All you need is a good plan.

You know what she wants.

Make her fantasy happen.

And she's yours.

CHAPTER FIVE

Granting Naughty Christmas Wishes

Kate

EARLY THE NEXT morning, I carried a large cardboard box into my mother's bedroom. I told myself that, regardless of what I decided to do with the house, leaving my mother's room in a shrine-like intact state wasn't healthy.

I laid the box in the middle of Mom's bed and took a fortifying deep breath, holding back the tears that threatened to spill. Mom had never liked tears. Ladies kept their composure.

I walked around the room, picking up photos she had kept on her bureau and nightstands. I knew people thought my mother had come from money, but the photos told the real story. Even when she smiled, Mom looked tired. She'd raised me by herself, determined I would have a better life than she'd had. My mother hadn't spoken much of her own childhood or her family. She'd only said that moving far away from them and my biological father had been a difficult, but necessary, decision.

Growing up, I had been very aware of how hard Mom worked to pay for my private school and music lessons. The amount of money she'd left me in her will was a testament to her determination to provide for me.

Holding a picture of my mother holding me in her arms and smiling down at me, I sat on the corner of her bed. *Do you regret the choices you made, Mom? Do you ever wish you'd come home early to take me to the park or read me bedtime stories instead of working extra hours to pay for my private tutors? In the long run, does it matter if I can speak three languages?*

I could almost hear her telling me to stop letting my emotions control me and just do what had to be done. Get in. Get out.

I wish I could, Mom. I know holding on to your stuff won't bring you back. I know you didn't want me to return to this house, this town. Why do I feel like I need to be here?

I placed the photo back on the table and tossed the cardboard box on the floor near the bed. I stood and smoothed the bedsheets before walking out of the room and closing the door quietly.

The doorbell rang and I jumped in surprise. No one visited my house. No one ever had.

Rushing to the door, I peered out the small windows centered in the door's upper half. There was no one there. I opened the door, looked around, and was about to retreat inside when I noticed a beautifully decorated gift box lying in the middle of the welcome mat. I picked it up and, unable to see any trace of who might have left it, carried it back into the house.

I placed it on the kitchen table and paced beside it. There was a chance it could be from Wayne. He'd promised to have our final divorce papers to me that week. However, the box was small and rectangular. It would have been an odd shape for such a document.

Plus, wrapping divorce papers in gold paper, then topping them with a big red velvet bow, would be a sick joke. Wayne might be self-absorbed and ruled by the whims of his indiscriminate dick, but he wasn't cruel. Not that kind of cruel.

If he sent a bomb, it's a tiny one.

And why would he want to off me when I'm walking away from him without asking for a dime?

I weighed the box in my hand. As I moved it, I heard something sliding back and forth inside. *Okay, now I have to know.*

I ripped off the bow and wrapping paper and opened the white box that was inside. It held a cell phone and a black piece of paper with a note written in gold ink.

Dear Kate,

Your letter has been received and processed. Santa doesn't grant the type of Christmas wish you requested, but I do.

In the spirit of the holiday, I'll offer you twelve temptations that will guide you to what you're craving. In return, you will follow my instructions and tell me every juicy detail of your journey.

We will communicate only through texts.

Temptation number one is right in front of you. Turn on the phone, Kate. I'm the only number in there.

Waiting to hear from you,

Head Elf in charge of the Naughty List

P.S. I'd take you up on the offer to fuck you, but this isn't about me. It's about you. I can show you how to get what you want, but you have to be brave enough to turn on the phone.

I dropped the letter on the table and stood. *This is even sicker than I'd imagined. Some wackjob found my letter and now thinks he can get his jollies this way?*

Who in their right mind would turn that phone on?

No one.

Head Elf?

Most likely some perverted old guy found my letter.

Eww.

Or, double ewwww, a horny teenager.

I reread the letter. All the spelling was correct, so I crossed off the teenage boy as an option. Still, the possibilities of who

had written it were limitless and included some downright disgusting men.

I considered throwing the phone right in the trash.

Giving it to the police.

Or tossing it out the front door to show the author of the letter exactly what I thought of his proposal. That would send a clear message.

Or I could tell him he's a pig. He's waiting for a text from me.

I'll give him one.

CHAPTER SIX

The Game Begins

Kate

I PICKED UP the phone, turned it on, and texted.

Kate: You sick bastard. I am going to give this phone and your letter to the police if you ever contact me again.

A moment later, the phone vibrated to announce an incoming text.

H. E.: Do it. While you're there, tell them about the letter you sent me.

Kate: I didn't send you anything. I don't even know who you are.

H. E.: Yes, you do. I'm the Head Elf in charge of granting naughty Christmas wishes.

I rolled my eyes.

Kate: An elf? Really? Wow, that's a sexy image.

H. E.: I told you. This is not about me. But by the end of our time together, you will fuck whoever I tell you to.

I dropped the phone, then scrambled to pick it up.

Kate: I am throwing this phone in the trash, along with your letter. I'm not interested in whatever perverted game you're playing.

H. E.: There is nothing perverted about learning how to please yourself, Kate. And nothing's wrong with wanting to enjoy sex.

Kate: Would you stop talking to me like you know me?

H. E.: I do know you. I'm an elf. We know everyone.

Kate: You're delusional.

H. E.: And you're tempted. You'll receive a present from me every day for the next eleven days, Kate. Text me when you open them, and I'll tell you what to do.

Kate: I'm not doing this.

He didn't answer.

And even though it made no sense at all, I didn't throw the phone away, instead I placed it in my purse, threw on my coat, and decided to clear my head by getting out of the house. Too much time alone was definitely affecting my ability to think straight.



Brock

I WAS GETTING a coffee to go at Molly's Café when Kate walked in. She looked around at the full tables like a new student assessing where to sit during lunch. People assumed she was stuck-up because she didn't smile at them, but I always thought she would if they gave her half a chance.

I met her at the door. "Good morning, Kate."

She jumped in surprise, and her face transformed as she recognized me. "I remember you. Brock Foster, right?" She removed her gloves and tucked them into the pockets of her coat.

My cock juttet in my pants at the memory of our earlier conversation, but I carefully kept my expression neutral. "Having breakfast here?"

She looked around again with an almost wistful look on her face. "No, just getting a coffee to go."

I glanced down at my watch. I was already ten minutes later than I'd planned to be, but there were perks to being my own boss. "I was about to order something myself, but I hate to eat alone."

She smiled at that. “Me too.”

“Join me?” I asked spontaneously, not really expecting her to agree.

“Yes, thank you,” she said.

I cursed my persistent hard-on for making it difficult to come up with anything intelligent to say. Instead of speaking, I waved at an empty table and followed her there. Once we were seated, I said, “So, you’re back in town.” *Real witty.*

“I am,” she said softly, nervously opening and closing the glossy menu.

“For how long?”

She looked skyward, then toward the door, obviously uncomfortable with my question. “I don’t know. As long as it takes. I have to clean out my mother’s house.”

I instantly felt like an ass for sending her the phone and the note. Kate needed a friend more than she needed a fuck. “I was sorry to hear about your mother’s passing.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

The waitress came by and asked if we were ready to order. Kate opened her menu, scanned it, then looked up at her with shiny eyes as if she were on the verge of crying. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I want.”

More than anything I wanted to reach across the table, take her hand in mine, and tell her everything would be okay. Instead I said, “Why don’t you have something you normally wouldn’t? What do you usually say no to because you think it’s too indulgent?”

Kate’s eyes flew to mine, and I cursed myself for being too obvious. I waited for her to call me out and ask if I was the pervert who’d sent her the phone, but she didn’t. She shook her head as if shaking off a silly idea, then looked down at the menu again. “The chocolate pancakes, I guess. With whipped cream. And a cherry.”

I almost groaned at the image that put in my head. I knew just where I'd put the cream, and how much I'd enjoy licking it off.

"And what about you, sir?" the waitress asked.

"I want whatever she wants," I said and kicked myself. "I mean, whatever she ordered. I'll have that." The waitress poured coffee for both of us and I gulped it down. *Calm down. You're going to blow this.* After a quiet moment, I said, "That can't be easy—cleaning out your mom's house. Do you have someone helping you?"

Kate looked away and shook her head. "No, no one. I'm sure you've heard my marriage tanked."

"I did. The guy must have been an idiot to screw things up with you."

Kate looked at me and smiled. "Thanks. You always were a nice guy, Brock. That's what I remember most about you."

Great. Nice. That's the no-fuck page in every woman's little black book. If I asked her out right then, I had no doubt she'd refuse. I considered myself reasonably attractive. I kept myself in good shape. Dressed well. Women normally chased me. But I wasn't good enough for Untouchable Kate. The challenge of changing her mind made the game I'd outlined for the next two weeks suddenly feel acceptable again.

For this to work, I'd have to keep up her impression of me as unthreatening. "I have some guys who owe me some extra hours. I can send a couple of them over to pack or move things if you need help."

She smiled at him again. "That is an extremely generous offer, but one I must refuse. This is something I have to do myself. And I will do it. I just have to get my head sorted out."

I gave her what I hoped was my sweetest smile. "Well, if you need anything, I'm not hard to find."

Our food arrived. We stayed on safe subjects while we ate. We discussed how it was colder than normal for that time of

year. We laughed about the large Rudolph the town still used in a decoration that topped a local dam. It had fallen into the river several times and was now a tattered leader of an otherwise pristine herd of reindeer pulling a large unmanned sleigh.

“Some things don’t change,” she said.

“Everything changes,” I said. “My dad would say that is life’s only constant—nothing stays the same.”

“I like your dad. He was always so kind to my mother. Do you still work for him?”

“No, not really. He retired, and I took over the company.”

Kate took a final bite of her breakfast, closed her eyes for a second as she savored it, then pushed her plate back. “So now you fix up houses like your dad did? That’s nice.”

I made a sound deep in my chest at her word choice. Waving over the waitress, I asked for the bill. Kate tried to give me money for it, but I refused her offer and paid the bill. “It’s on me.”

She tucked her money back into her wallet and said, “You didn’t have to do that.” She stood. “But thank you. And thank you for asking me to sit with you. That was really . . .”

I stood and pushed in my chair with more force than I meant to. “I know—*nice*.” We walked together out of the café and stood for a moment, awkwardly looking at each other. “You’re not alone in this town, Kate. If you need anything, just call.”

“I will,” she said as she buttoned her coat, but she said it in a tone that I knew meant she wouldn’t.

We parted and I climbed into my truck, debating the morality of moving forward with my plans for Kate. A better man would respect that she was in a period of transition in her life and leave her alone.

And that man would never fuck her.

If she wants a bad boy, I can be that man.

*And what she wants will be clear tomorrow morning when
I text her.*

If she answers.

I'm in.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Surprisingly Large Package

Kate

I WOKE THE next morning well before the sun came up. I showered and dressed in my usual pristine cotton slacks and silk blouse, even though I had no plans to go anywhere. I told myself I wasn't waiting for anything to arrive.

I paced back and forth in the living room, periodically pulling back the curtains to check if someone was on the doorstep. No one was, and each time I checked I swore I wouldn't do it again.

But I did.

Finally, around 8:00 a.m., I decided to make myself a cup of coffee to hopefully calm my churning stomach. *This is ridiculous. What I should be doing is calling the police and having them watch my house.*

The doorbell rang, and I tripped on the rug in the hallway as I sprinted to the door. As I lay there, sprawled out and wondering if I'd broken anything, I started to laugh.

Is this how it's going to end for me? The coroner will work with detectives to determine the cause of my death, and they'll have no other option but to conclude that I beat myself to death running for what is most likely a nicely wrapped dildo.

I pushed off the floor and stretched; although slightly sore, all of my limbs were still intact. When I finally opened the door, I didn't expect to find anyone there, and no one was.

The package was surprisingly large. Just like the gift the day before, it was covered in gold wrapping paper and a red

velvet ribbon. It was over a foot tall and twice as wide. I picked it up and carried it to the kitchen table.

I took the prepaid cell phone out of my purse and laid it beside the gift box. Together they represented everything I normally wouldn't do. More socially awkward than I cared to admit, I didn't open up easily to new people. It wasn't that I didn't like them; it was that I never knew what to say or how to behave. I had a reputation for being unfriendly, but the truth was, I was painfully shy. Definitely not the type to trust a nameless, faceless, sexually deviant texter, no matter how many gifts he sent.

Still, was there any harm in opening the gift just to see what it was? I could always rewrap it. Of course, I wasn't going to use whatever was in it, but putting it back outside on the porch without at least peeking at its contents? Well, who could do that?

I picked up the box and shook it. I'd never been good at guessing the contents of a gift, but it sounded like there were bottles inside.

Oh, what the hell.

I tore off the ribbon and paper, uncovering an expensive-looking white box emblazoned with gold letters. *Judy's Bath and Beauty*. I removed the lid, took out the contents one item at a time, and was amazed by the thoughtfulness that had gone into the gift.

A handmade, thigh-length, white cotton robe decorated with stunning embroidery was tucked in a basket with matching bath slippers. There were three white vanilla-scented candles, a wide variety of bath soaps, and a variety of lotions. Had I designed a gift basket for myself, I couldn't have chosen better.

It was eerie and sweet.

I picked up the phone and took a deep breath. If I turned it on I might as well put a sign in my front yard announcing to my elf friend that I wanted more gifts. The most sensible

course of action would be to place the phone inside the box, along with all of the items I'd removed, and put it out on the curb.

I turned the phone on. He hadn't texted since the day before, and I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed.

I shook my head and put both my own cell phone and its crazy companion into my purse. I needed a few things from the supermarket and decided that getting out of the house for the day would stop me from making an impulsive and possibly dangerous decision.

I stopped by the mirror on the way out, absently checking that my hair and makeup were in place while I shrugged on my winter coat. Appearances had been important to my mother and, therefore, they had always mattered to me. Outward beauty, I had recently learned, could conceal a host of evils. Wendy had admitted to me that part of the thrill of sleeping with Wayne had been finally beating me at something. I had considered Wendy a friend, not someone I was competing with. I was still trying to understand how one person could celebrate the ill fortune of another.

Marriage vows meant nothing. Friendships concealed malicious intent.

What was left to believe in?

A short while later, I was choosing a carton of eggs when I heard three women talking a few feet away from me.

"I heard she's only here until her divorce is final. As soon as the money comes in, she's gone."

"Eli told me that's her natural hair color. I don't think it could be, do you?"

I closed my eyes. *I suppose I should be grateful they aren't discussing my letter to Santa. Maybe my perverted elf can keep a secret.*

"She's skinny, but too skinny, you know what I mean? There's that line where thin is beautiful, and then you cross

into ‘looks sickly.’ She looked prettier when she first got here, didn’t she?”

“I think she’s still beautiful. Too bad she’s such a bitch.”

I dropped the carton of eggs on the floor and turned, adjusting my purse on my shoulder and walked away from the mess, not stopping until I was standing right in front of the women who were now staring at me with mouths hanging open. I forced a smile and said, “I am not a bitch. I have never and would never do anything to hurt anyone. I wish I could say the same about the three of you. I lost my mother and my husband in one year. If my appearance is not up to your standards, please have the decency to discuss it where I don’t have to hear you.” With that, I proudly raised my chin and walked away, leaving my full shopping cart in the middle of the aisle. I didn’t stop until I was back in my car, my hands shaking as they held the steering wheel.

Confrontation always made me nervous, but this time instead of feeling worse, I felt empowered. Ladylike or not, I’d stood up for myself—and it felt damn good.

My stomach was growling, and I impulsively drove to Molly’s Café. Only a few of the tables were occupied. I’d half hoped to run into Brock again, but upon not seeing him I told myself it was for the best. He probably had a girlfriend, and I was already unpopular enough in town without stirring up that kind of trouble. Still, I chose the same table Brock and I had eaten at and ordered the chocolate pancakes again—only this time with double whipped cream. The same waitress from the day before delivered the decadent stack and joked, “I guess you really liked them. It’s good to indulge sometimes. What is life without a little fun?”

I thought about the gift back at my house and came to a decision. “You are absolutely right.” I savored every bite of the melted chocolate and cream, left the waitress a huge tip, and went home to take a nice long bath.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Not Her Friend

Brock

I KEPT CHECKING my prepaid phone for a text from Kate, but one never came. The employee I'd asked to drop off my gifts each day was pretty sure she hadn't seen him leaving them. I was paying the young man well to be discreet, and had promised to pay him double at the end of the game if she never caught him. The young man had looked on the verge of asking several questions when I had approached him about running a few covert errands for some extra cash, but he'd kept them to himself as soon as I doubled the offer. Money had a way of silencing questions.

I was closing the office when my sister and her best friend came in. Linda was my twin by birth, my friend by choice. She was exceptionally short and joked that God had given her a personality twice her size to make up for it. She dealt with the vendors, and they loved her. All her sweet talk softened her directness. Vendors paid on time because they didn't want to be on her bad side, but they sent her baskets of goodies around the holidays because they also loved her smile.

Her friend Dawn, with her dark brown hair and eyes, looked like a taller version of Linda. Most people assumed they were sisters. Together, they were a force to be reckoned with.

Diving right in without the pleasantries of a greeting, Linda said, "Brock, I'm going to hell."

I hugged her and laughed. "And this is news?"

Linda smiled broadly and smacked his arm. "Seriously, I discovered today I'm not nice and neither is Dawn."

Dawn shrugged, but she was also smiling. “I said she was too skinny. You’re the one who called her a bitch.”

“You practically called her ugly,” Linda volleyed.

“I said she was bordering on it.”

Linda dismissed the difference with a wave of her hand. “Whatever, I said she was still pretty, just bitchy. I didn’t know she could hear us.”

With a sinking feeling I knew who they were referring to, I asked, “Who did you two offend?”

Linda made a circular motion with a finger. “It was three of us. Kim was there.” Linda shook both hands with comic anger in the air. “Oh, my God, it was so awkward. You know Untouchable Kate?”

“You mean Kate Hale?” I asked, feeling the correction was necessary.

“Yes, her. Okay, so she was at the supermarket, and we were picking up supplies for the office holiday party, and she heard us talking about her.”

Dawn’s eyes were wide at the memory. “You should have seen how upset she was. She told us off.”

“Good for her,” I said, folding my arms over my chest. “Sounds like you three deserved it.”

Linda scrunched up her face and said, “I know. We did. I feel awful. I never would have said anything if I thought she could hear me.”

I raised one eyebrow. “How about, you never should have said anything at all?”

Linda referenced herself and her friend with a waving finger. “Human over here. Not like you, Mr. Perfect.”

Dawn made a pained face. “The thing is—we feel really bad. When she said she’d lost her mother and her husband in the same year, she looked like she was going to cry. Is there a

bouquet for when you've accidentally been a complete ass to someone?"

"I'm sure an apology would suffice," I suggested.

"Like in a text?" Linda asked, looking to Dawn for confirmation. "I could probably get her number."

"Don't text her," I said quickly, then stopped myself from saying more.

Linda nodded. "Brock is right. We should go see her and take her a plate of cookies or something."

Dawn looked skeptical. "Is that going to look like we're trying to fatten her up?"

Shaking her head, Linda said, "No, it's almost Christmas. Everyone gives out cookies this time of year." When Dawn still didn't look convinced, Linda added, "If you feel funny about visiting her, we could leave a note and cookies on her doorstep. You know, like a peace offering."

"No," I said emphatically.

Linda and Dawn stopped and gave me a strange look. Linda said, "Wow, still bitter over your old crush on her?"

I couldn't meet my sister's eyes when I said, "No, I just think leaving something on her doorstep is not a good way to apologize to someone."

"Fine, that settles it. Dawn, we'll bake cookies this week and go see her."

Battling between wanting my sister to stay the hell away from Kate and wanting Kate to not feel so alone, I finally gave in and said, "If you do, ask her to go to lunch with you. I have the feeling she could use some friends right now. Even if they are as crazy as you all are."

"Do you want to come with us, Brock?" Dawn asked.

"No. I don't want to be her friend."

CHAPTER NINE

Call Me Master

Brock

THAT NIGHT, I paced the rooms of my one-bedroom apartment. I'd never needed much space and worked too much to care about where I lived. My place was clean. It was conveniently located near work and family. That had always been good enough for me.

Except now it felt small and suffocating.

I picked up the phone I'd purchased to communicate with Kate and decided I was done waiting for her to contact him.

H. E.: Did you like my package, Kate? As soon as I hit send, I reread the message and groaned at the double entendre.
Is it any wonder she hasn't answered me?

Kate: Surprisingly, I did. It wasn't at all what I expected.

That's good, isn't it?

H. E.: You didn't text me for instructions when you received it.

Kate: It really wasn't that confusing. I've taken baths before. I figured it out.

The conversation wasn't going at all the way I'd imagined it.

H. E.: Did you think of me while you were hot and wet?

Kate: I don't know anything about you, so . . . no. I didn't want to ruin the moment by imagining an old man or some teenage boy jerking off to the idea of me in a tub.

H. E.: I'm not either of those.

Kate: I don't know that. Maybe if you told me who you were . . .

H. E.: Not going to happen. Tell me about the bath. Did you think about anyone while you were soaping yourself? Did it make you so hot you had to stroke yourself until you came?

Kate: Honestly? No and no. But it was nice. The candles are my favorite scent.

I sank onto the couch and groaned. *Nice? Seriously?* The phone beside me beeped with an incoming message.

Kate: I liked the lotions too.

So much for the articles that said a romantic bath always put women in the mood for sex. There was no way in hell I was going to blow my one chance with Kate. I tossed the phone onto the other side of the couch and reached for my laptop. As it booted up, I cracked my knuckles and rolled up my sleeves.

I searched for popular female fantasies and studied them with determination. I scoured the internet for what women were reading. My friends were wrong. It wasn't one spicy book that women were talking about, it was the whole genre that was popular. The heat level of some of the romances made my eyebrows meet my hairline a few times. But I downloaded a few of them and read them like I was cramming for a college exam.

Kate Hale, prepare yourself.

This elf is going alpha.



Kate

I LINGERED AROUND my house the next day waiting for the doorbell to ring. This time I wasn't even trying to pretend I wasn't waiting. The day before, the package had arrived early, but today lunchtime came without a delivery.

When I returned from making lunch in the kitchen, either the doorbell hadn't rung or I hadn't heard it because there on

the porch was my next gift. It was wrapped as the first two had been and was larger than the day before's. I hurriedly carried it to the kitchen table.

I tore it open without hesitation. Inside were several smaller boxes. I opened the first and found a pair of jeans. I laughed and sent a text.

Kate: Jeans?

H. E.: Is that all you've opened so far?

Kate: Yes. But why would you send me jeans? I'm totally confused.

H. E.: I like them. They'll make your ass look amazing. And you'll wear them tonight.

Kate: I will?

H. E.: You will. Open the rest of the boxes, Kate.

The next contained a bottle that looked like perfume. I read its label. Pheromones. The description said they enhanced a woman's attractiveness.

Kate: So, you don't like how I dress, and you think I need help attracting men? Thanks. I'm not feeling naughty; I'm feeling insulted.

H. E.: The problem, Kate, is you're overthinking things. It holds you back. The jeans are because I like jeans. The pheromones are because you need confidence. So, tonight, you'll go to a bar and meet someone.

Kate: Why would I do that?

H. E.: Because you want to please me. And you will. Tonight. Open the last box, Kate.

I did, and my eyes rounded. Two silver Ben Wa balls were laid out in a box pretty enough to have held jewelry. They were attached to each other by a short string. A small silver remote control was in the box next to them.

Kate: I have no idea what to do with those.

H. E.: That's okay, we'll learn together.

Kate: You don't know either?

There was a pause before he texted.

H. E.: I meant I'll teach you.

I should be creeped out by receiving such an intimate object from a man who claimed to be an elf. However, I wasn't. In fact, for some reason I couldn't understand, I was beginning to trust him.

Kate: Okay.

H. E.: Take off whatever you're wearing and insert them.

Kate: Right now?

H. E.: Yes.

Kate: I feel like I should wash them first.

H. E.: Okay, go wash them, then insert them.

I did. They were cold at first, but not in an unpleasant way. I clenched my vaginal muscles around them, at first afraid they would fall out.

Kate: They're in.

H. E.: Now put on the jeans.

Kate: With them inside me?

H. E.: Yes. Don't take them out until I tell you to.

I put my undies back on, then pulled on the jeans. They fit snugly, removing my worry that a ball would drop to the floor.

Kate: The jeans fit perfectly.

H. E.: I don't care about the jeans. How do the balls feel?

Kate: They're interesting.

H. E.: I think it gets better when you start to walk around with them.

Kate: You think?

H. E.: Walk around, Kate.

Lapping around the couch, I had to admit the balls' movement inside me excited me. Not orgasm hot, but a

warmth that spread through me.

Kate: I heard these are good for a woman's health too.

H. E.: Stop thinking, Kate. Go get the remote. Turn them on.

I turned the dial all the way and gasped. *Whoa, that's too high.* I lowered the vibration.

Kate: I can see why people like this.

H. E.: Tell me how it feels.

I hesitated, then texted.

Kate: It's amazing. I can feel myself getting wet. I had no idea it would feel that good.

H. E.: That's your G-spot, Kate.

Kate: I like it.

H. E.: Good. But don't like it too much. You can't come until I tell you to.

Kate: You can't tell me what to do. I don't even know you.

H. E.: I'm already telling you. And you're doing it. You know why? Because I will get you the mind-blowing fuck you've always wanted. But only after you follow my rules. For the next nine days.

Follow his rules? Why am I already doing that? And why do I not want to stop?

Because it feels good and I want to feel to something besides sad.

Kate: Okay.

H. E.: Leave the balls in, Kate. Every hour, I want you to turn them on for five minutes. Then turn them off. But don't remove them. Tonight, go to Grady's Bar at nine and keep them in. Wear those jeans on your perfect little ass, and spray your neck with what's in that bottle. Don't leave until you have the phone number of a man you find attractive. That's the man you'll picture when you return home and I finally let you come. That's the face you'll see when you stroke yourself tonight.

Kate: Will you be there?

H. E.: No. This isn't about me, Kate. It's about you. The bath was only disappointing because you let it be. You should have had your fingers pumping in and out of yourself while imagining someone fucking you. Try it again tomorrow, and picture the man you meet tonight. But nothing happens between you and him unless I say so. Understood, Kate? You're mine. Not his. Only fuck him if I tell you to.

The game suddenly felt very real, and I had a rush of doubt. *This is crazy. I can't do this. I don't like bars. I don't like crowds.*

H. E.: Kate?

Kate: I can't do this.

H. E.: Yes, you can.

Kate: You don't understand. I can't just walk into a bar and get a guy's number. I get nervous around people I don't know. I never know what to say.

H. E.: Kate. You are a beautiful woman. You could say nothing and get someone's number.

Kate: I'm going to throw up.

H. E.: Even that wouldn't stop a guy from giving you his number, Kate. But you're not going to throw up. Get the remote. Keep turning the dial up until you stop thinking. A really good fuck starts in your head, Kate. Your head. You need to learn to turn off the noise. When you do, nothing will make you nervous.

I did just that, and a warm heat spread through my stomach. Soon the intensity of the stimulation had me gripping the side of the couch. If I kept it up, I would come right then and there. I thought about what he'd said and turned them off. I could wait.

Kate: Do you have a name? I can't keep thinking of you as an elf. It's not very sexy.

H. E.: You can call me Master.

I chuckled.

Kate: That's not going to happen.

H. E.: You might like it. Try it.

Kate: Good-bye, Mr. Elf.

H. E.: Until tonight, Kate. Don't forget. Turn the balls on for five minutes every hour. And don't take them out.

I didn't answer. I didn't have to. We both knew I was his to command. At least, for nine more days.

CHAPTER TEN

What Has Gotten *into* You Tonight?

Brock

I CHANGED MY shirt three times and cursed for not getting a haircut that week. It was eight thirty and I was a shaggy wreck.

Calm the fuck down.

I needed to get my ass over to Grady's before Kate arrived. I'd sent her to a bar I knew would be full of tattooed, drunk rednecks. If all went as planned, I'd be an island of familiarity in an ocean of otherwise scary choices, and she would beeline it to me.

I didn't want it to seem like I was expecting her, nor did I want to look like I didn't belong there. I needed just the right outfit, so I changed back into a light-blue button-down cotton shirt and jeans.

I sped over to Grady's and rushed to order a beer as soon as I arrived. I'd barely planted myself on a stool at the bar when Kate walked in. A silence fell over the normally rowdy crowd as all turned to look at her.

She stood transfixed at the door with her eyes opened wide, looking like she was about to bolt. She scanned the crowd quickly, passing me over. Then her head snapped back around as she recognized me.

I raised my beer to her.

A relieved smile spread across her face, and she stepped into the bar. As she walked toward me, a delightful pink lit her cheeks, and I wanted to haul her out of there and into my bed. My cock throbbed with the same desire.

She stood beside my chair and looked up at me so shyly I almost felt guilty for being the reason she was there. “Hi,” she said softly.

“Hi, Kate. You look amazing.”

She blushed and looked away. “Thanks. Do you mind if I . . . I mean . . . if you’re with someone I don’t want to . . .”

I pulled an extra stool over. “Have a seat. I’m here alone.” She sat on the stool carefully, and I hid a smile. *She still has them in. Good.*

“Me too,” she said simply, clasping her hands in her lap.

“Want a beer?”

“I don’t drink beer. I’ll take a white wine, though.”

I ordered it for her, and she sipped it quietly beside me. To make sure there was no misunderstanding, I said, “I’m not dating anyone, Kate.”

She smiled as she took another sip of wine but didn’t meet my eyes. “I’m not either.”

Loud country music started playing in the background. I moved closer so she could hear me. “Do you want to dance?”

“Here?” She looked around in surprise. “No one is dancing.”

“Someone has to start,” I said as if I’d done it before. I took her hand and led her to an area of the bar that was more open. I would have pulled her closer, but I didn’t think she was ready for my raging hard-on. Not yet.

As we moved together with the music, I watched her face. She was flushed, and her eyes shone with an excitement I wasn’t sure had to do with me or with the movement of those balls inside her. I wondered if she was as wet as I was hard. *God, I could fuck her right here, right now. And not care who’s watching.*

She looked up and met my eyes. “I thought your eyes were green, but now they look blue.”

“They’re somewhere in between,” I said, hoping I didn’t come right there while explaining my eye color to her. “They tend to look the color of the shirt I wear.”

“They’re beautiful,” she said, then blushed again and looked away.

“Why thank you, Kate.” I strove for a casual tone. “It’s nice to get a compliment now and then.”

She peered back up at me from beneath her long lashes. “You must get them often. You’re a good-looking man.”

I leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Kate Hale, what has gotten *into* you tonight?”

She pulled back, eyes wide, and stopped dancing for a moment. “What did you say?”

I was so turned-on I didn’t know what I was saying. “You don’t normally flirt, that’s all.”

“Oh, yeah.” She relaxed in his arms and began dancing with me again. “Sorry.”

I whispered in her ear again. “Don’t be. I like it.”

She shuddered beneath my touch, and I was tempted to call the game off and ask her to go home with me. But I didn’t want to rush her. When she came to me—and she would, on the twelfth day—I wanted her to do the asking, the begging.

“So, is there anything new?”

She swallowed visibly. “No.”

“The music is too loud to talk. Let’s get out of here. Want to go for a walk?”

She shuddered again. “Okay.”

We stepped out of the loud bar together and, despite the coats we’d grabbed on the way out, were hit with the frigid night air. I laughed. “I didn’t think this out well. It’s too cold for a walk. Do you want to go back inside?”

She held her jacket tightly around her and shook her head.

I gave her my sexiest smile. “Do you want to come home with me?”

She shook her head again, but her mouth parted slightly in excitement. “No, I can’t.”

I tucked one of her long blonde locks behind her ear. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes. I promised not to . . . I mean, we barely know each other.”

“We’ve known each other for a long time, Kate.”

She took a step back, then blurted, “Can I just have your number?”

I smiled, wrote my cell number on a piece of paper, and handed it to her. “Sure.”

She pocketed it and took another step back. “I have to go.”

I hoped she was in a rush to get home for the same reason I was. I really wanted to sink into her wet sex, but I’d settle for talking her through an orgasm while I jacked off.

“Good night, Kate.”

She hurried toward her car, pausing to look over at me as she unlocked it. She frowned and shook her head, then climbed in.

I broke speed limits on the way back to my apartment.

I hope I don’t get pulled over.

Officer, you do not understand how important it is for me to get home—right now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

This Isn't Real, Is It?

Kate

BY THE TIME I drove up to the front of my house, I was shaking with pent-up sexual frustration. My naughty elf was right: Fantasizing about someone in particular while my body awakened made all the difference. I'd turned on the Ben Wa balls during the drive home and had imagined what it would have been like to go home with Brock.

Would he have been gentle, as his personality implied? Or did he have a wilder side he concealed, as I did? I pulled into my garage, and as soon as the door closed, I turned off the car, unbuckled the front of my jeans, slid my hand inside the front of my panties, and began to stroke myself with my middle finger.

I was hot even in the quickly cooling car. The balls within me moved around, now and then hitting a spot that had me gasping and rubbing myself furiously. A phone beeped in my purse and I ignored it, closing my eyes and bringing me closer and closer to climax.

The phone beeped again, and I paused. It was the prepaid phone. I groaned and rummaged through my purse to find it.

H. E.: Are you home?

Kate: Yes and no. I'm in my car in the garage. I didn't even make it into the house.

H. E.: Are you already touching yourself, Kate?

Kate: Yes. Now that I have someone to think about, this whole thing is even hotter. I can't type right now. I can't wait any longer.

H. E.: You can and you will. Are the balls on?

Kate: Yes. I drove home with them on. They feel so good.

H. E.: Take them out. Now.

Kate: No.

H. E.: Yes, Kate. You almost had an orgasm without me. That's not allowed. You have to be punished.

Kate: Listen, I'm loving your sex tips, but I'm not into punishment.

H. E.: Get out of the car, Kate. Strip naked and take those balls out of you. Now.

Kate: It's fucking freezing out there.

H. E.: Yes, it is. You could have been in a warm bath tonight, but you didn't follow my directions. Tell me you at least got a man's phone number.

Kate: I did.

H. E.: Good. Then you'll get your orgasm. But not inside. I want you naked. Cold. Remembering how important it is to follow my commands.

I stepped out of the car. The cold night air hit me. He was nuts if he thought I was going to be able to do anything but freeze to death out here if I stripped.

Kate: It's too cold out here.

H. E.: Saying no to me only earns you another punishment, Kate. Strip.

I took off my coat. My body was warm with excitement from our game. I stepped out of my shoes and pants, then my shirt. I turned off the balls and removed them.

Kate: I'm naked and fucking freezing. Happy?

H. E.: Put your coat on the hood of the car, then lie on your back on top of it. Put the phone next to you and call me. I won't talk to you. You don't deserve to hear my voice. But I will hear you. Use the balls. Use your hand. Tell me what you're doing. Everything you're doing, and how it feels. And when you come, put the phone close enough to you so I can hear you. Every time you shiver, every time you think

you can't take it anymore, remind yourself you earned this. You belong to me now. And you will do as I say. After you come, hang up and text me.

I wanted to say no, to tell him exactly where he and his punishments could go. But I'd never been so turned on in my life. I didn't want the feeling to end. Even if it meant temporarily freezing my ass off.

I placed my coat and phone on the hood of the car, climbed up, and called him. Just as he'd said, he didn't speak. There was something insanely erotic about knowing he could be anyone, and he could hear me. The hood of the car was warmer than I'd expected. Not that I would have cared either way. I was so excited I could barely think.

"I need one of the balls back inside me." I rammed one of the balls in. "And I need them back on." I turned them on. "The ball isn't deep enough. I need it deeper. I want it right on my G-spot." I used my finger to push it deeper. "Oh, God, that's it. That's fucking it. Oh, yes."

I closed my eyes and took the other ball in my hand. "I'm putting this ball on my clit. Holy shit. That's good. That is so fucking good." I rubbed the ball back and forth over my nub until I found the perfect spot for it. Then I pressed down, caressing the area in small circular motions. "I wish I had something else inside me. I need Brock here ramming his cock into me right now. But this is good. I'm using my finger and imagining it's his cock. I'm pumping it in and out. I am so wet. Shit. This is amazing."

As my excitement swelled, my ability to articulate what I was doing diminished. I pictured Brock above me, pushing my legs wider apart. I stroked harder, faster, and my words turned into moans. I ran a hand over my cold breasts and imagined my fingers were his mouth. My nipples were puckered and hard. I pinched one of them, imagining his teeth biting into me, and the mixture of pain and pleasure that coursed through me drove me over the edge. "I'm going to come," I whispered, then cried out loudly as wave after wave of heat smashed

through me. I was drowning in the sensations—lost for a moment to the fire shooting through me. It didn't matter where my body was. I was floating in the warm glow of my climax.

I rolled off the car, pulled the Ben Wa ball out, grabbed my phone and keys, and walked stark naked into the house, still in a daze. I hung up the phone.

Kate: I'm done. I'm back in the house.

H. E.: You're not done until I say you are. Are you still naked?

Kate: Yes.

H. E.: Good. Where are the balls?

Kate: In my hand.

H. E.: Go wash them off and put them back in. Take the remote with you and go lie down on your bed.

Kate: Beneath the blankets, I hope. Hypothermia will end our game fast.

H. E.: You're bold when you text. I like this side of you.

Kate: Do you know another side?

H. E.: I know of you.

Kate: In this town, that means you've heard nothing good.

H. E.: You're not who they say you are. You're not even who you think you are.

Kate: Really? Then who am I?

H. E.: You're mine.

Kate: Do you know how crazy that sounds? How crazy I feel for doing anything you say when I don't even know your real name? What am I doing?

H. E.: You're learning about yourself, Kate. Discovering what you like.

Kate: I know what I like.

H. E.: Do you?

Kate: Well, I know what I don't. And I'm not doing any of those things, even if you "punish" me.

H. E.: You always have a choice, Kate. Don't ever do anything you don't want to, even to please me.

Naked, I crawled beneath the thick blanket atop my bed and turned off the light.

Kate: Doesn't that go against the whole, You're my Master and I'm your—whatever they call the women they boss around?

H. E.: They call them subs. And I don't live by anyone else's rules, Kate. I make my own. Fantasy and sex are a powerful combination. I'm in control because you want me to be. This isn't about what I want. This is about finding that perfect fuck for you.

Kate: Who are you? Do I know you? Are you even a man?

H. E.: Kate, do you want my résumé or do you want that up-against-the-wall, mind-blowing orgasm you asked Santa for?

I didn't answer. I knew what I wanted but wasn't ready to tell him yet. I also wasn't entirely sure I liked him giving me the option to say no. It made us partners in a game I was already confused by.

H. E.: Turn on the balls, Kate.

I did and closed my eyes as my body shook with anticipation. I'd followed his instructions about turning them on for five minutes every hour that day. My body knew the pleasure they could bring. I became wet and ready even at the lowest level of vibration.

H. E.: Tell me about the man you met tonight.

Kate: You mean Brock?

H. E.: I don't give a shit about who he is. Tell me why you chose him.

I thought back to how I'd felt when I looked through the crowd and saw Brock.

Kate: He's good-looking. Tall. Muscular. Not like a man you'd see in a magazine, more like a regular build. But he has the most incredible

eyes. You feel like you know him as soon as you look into them. When he smiles it's with his whole face, and you can't help but smile back at him.

H. E.: That doesn't sound hot.

Kate: I never used to think it was. I've known him for a long time and never thought of him that way.

H. E.: But?

Kate: I don't know. Maybe it's these Ben Wa balls you have me using, but I almost went home with him. I wanted to see what's under all that winter clothing. And I would have if I hadn't promised you I wouldn't. I don't know what's crazier—that I'm listening to you or suddenly ready to sleep with a man I've known half my life but don't really know at all. I don't do casual sex. The only man I've ever been with was my husband.

H. E.: And me.

I rolled over onto my side.

Kate: I'm not actually with you. This isn't real.

H. E.: Isn't it? It felt real when I shot my load to the sound of you coming.

Kate: You did?

H. E.: Oh, yeah.

Kate: Depending on who you are, that's either really nasty, or it's the sexiest thing I've ever heard. This is so confusing. It doesn't bother you that when I came I was thinking about Brock?

H. E.: You think too much, Kate. Stop worrying about who I am and let yourself enjoy the next nine days.

Kate: What happens after that? Does this just end?

H. E.: No, Kate. In nine days, you fuck *ME*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He Won't Know. How Would He Know?

Brock

NAKED ON TOP of the blankets of my bed, I put the phone down. Part of me couldn't believe Kate had done everything I'd asked her to. Any man who was not keeping up on the way women were changing was missing out.

I reread the texts and told myself I'd have to be more careful. Kate wasn't looking for the boy next door. She wanted a strong, domineering man who could awaken her sexually.

In the business world, I wasn't intimidated by competition, and my business was booming because I was fearlessly going after what I wanted. I didn't take no for an answer; I took it as a challenge.

In the bedroom, I'd always taken a gentler approach. I'd grown up in a happy family where women were treated with respect, treasured. The more I spoke to Kate, both in person and via texts, the more I cared about her. I couldn't turn that off just because I wanted to fuck her.

I downloaded a porn video onto my laptop, then compared it to the sex scenes in the hottest romance books selling online. Some of the men in the books were downright assholes to the women they slept with, and I wasn't into half of what they did.

I counted off the days we had left. I'd already arranged a delivery for the next morning, but now I needed to add something to the gift. I purchased it online and chose overnight delivery.

H. E.: Tomorrow you will receive two gifts. Don't open them until I contact you in the evening. Until then, you are not to remove the Ben Wa balls. Go anywhere you want, but turn the balls on for fifteen minutes every hour, no matter where you are or who you're with.

Kate: And if I don't?

H. E.: What are you most afraid of, Kate? People looking at you? People judging you? Tomorrow you will only think about how much you can't wait to come home and fuck yourself with the new toy I bought you, even while you are meeting with other people.

Kate: That's one way to get over shyness, I guess.

H. E.: One more thing, Kate. Find Brock tomorrow, and tell him how much you enjoyed meeting him. But while you talk to him, turn those Ben Wa balls up until you can't concentrate on what he's saying. When you look at him, imagine his cock pounding into you. While you talk to him, I want you to find a way to masturbate without him knowing. Come right there in front of him. Then kiss him on the cheek and walk away.

Kate: How am I supposed to do that?

H. E.: Figure it out. And tell me about it tomorrow night. Good night, Kate.

Kate: Good night, Mr. Elf.

I groaned and turned onto my side, taking my shaft in my hand and pumping up and down. I doubted I'd be able to sleep that night, or concentrate on any of the meetings I'd scheduled for the next day.

All I could think about was Kate and how fucking exciting it was going to be watching her come covertly. I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep my hands off her while she did. But I'd have to.

I closed my eyes and brought myself to another climax by imagining how Kate had looked fucking herself on the roof of her car. In my mind, I pushed her legs apart and sank my tongue into her wet sex, finally having what had been out of my reach for so long.

By the time I revealed my double identity, she would be grateful to me for bringing her fantasy alive. And she would trust me because she'd gotten to know me.

Yes, I'd taste her soon enough.

As long as I held to my plan.



Kate

I WOKE LATER than normal and rolled over in bed, enjoying the warmth of my thick blanket. I smiled into my pillow remembering how I'd spent the day before. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I wasn't a bundle of nerves. The day had been insane, yes, it had ended with an orgasm stronger than one I'd ever experienced. I'd masturbated before, but this had been different.

It wasn't the spark of heat that had spread through me and left me feeling relaxed. No, my climax yesterday had slowly built throughout the day and culminated in a mind-altering experience. It had taken me, ever so temporarily, outside of my normal life and had felt larger.

I may have found my new religion.

I looked at the ceiling. Just kidding. Mom? God? If you're listening, don't. I will repent after Christmas. Let's agree to disagree for now on what is right and wrong. It's been a long year, and I need this.

I threw back the covers and donned the robe Mr. Elf had given me. I tucked my feet into the matching slippers. It was hard to be afraid of a man who was as considerate as he was naughty.

I shuffled to the bathroom, removed the Ben Wa balls, and took a long hot shower. It didn't even occur to me not to replace them after I'd cleaned them off. Day four of my twelve days and I'd never felt better.

Keep this up, Santa, and I may begin to believe in you again.

While I dried my hair, I turned on the balls and closed my eyes to savor the now-familiar vibration. It wasn't enough to make me come, but it sent my heart racing and brought an excited flush to my cheeks. I applied less makeup than normal. I didn't need to hide beneath layers of it. I felt beautiful.

I chose a thong and a small lace bra, then layered a simple tan skirt and an untucked peach blouse over it. No idea how I would secretly masturbate in front of Brock, but I had a feeling it started with choosing the right outfit. The mere thought of attempting this challenge had me stroking myself almost without realizing it. I hunted in the back of my closet for a heavy coat and cut off both pockets. In front of a full-length mirror, I put the coat on and checked to see how obvious it would be if I slid my hand through one of the holes and down my skirt.

It wasn't ideal. I pulled a small chair over, sat down with my purse on my lap, and tried it again. Perfection. If I was careful, Brock would have no idea what I was doing.

I called Brock's office and told his secretary I'd like to speak with him as soon as possible. The woman gave me directions to Brock's latest work site. Finding him was easier than I had expected, but I wasn't about to question why.

I nervously skipped breakfast and decided to start my day with a bang. On the drive to see Brock, I planned exactly what I'd say to him. I'd keep it casual. Simple. I saw his truck in the mill lot and parked beside it. My heart started thudding wildly in my chest.

Part of me wanted to turn tail and run, but another part wanted to push past my fears and be able to tell Mr. Elf all about it that night. *Confidence. I need confidence.*

I turned the Ben Wa balls to a medium setting. Enough to be a distraction without being audible to anyone. *I can do this.*

A woman started waving at me and walking over from the work trailer as I stepped out of my car. *Shit*. It was one of the women who had insulted me at the supermarket. *Double shit*. I was about to retreat back into my car when the woman blocked my way.

“Don’t go, Kate. I was hoping to run into you. I’m Brock’s sister, Linda.” She held out a hand in greeting, but I didn’t shake it.

I couldn’t meet her eyes. The balls were vibrating away within me and I prayed the other woman couldn’t hear them. “I just remembered I forgot something on . . . at home.”

“Don’t leave because of me. I was completely wrong the other day, and I’ve been trying to think of a way to apologize to you for it.”

The woman’s smile was as open and friendly as Brock’s, which made the encounter somehow worse. “I really should go.”

“If you came to see Brock, he’s in his trailer.” She gave me another disarmingly friendly smile and said, “I know it’s none of my business, but I heard the two of you were dancing last night at Grady’s. If you like him, don’t let me be the reason you don’t give him a chance. I’m pretty sure he’s had a crush on you since he was ten.”

I felt a confusing rush of emotions. *A crush on me? Brock?* I didn’t want to think about Brock’s feelings. He was part of my game with another man. I wanted to get in, have my secret orgasm, get out, and go see what Mr. Elf had sent me. “I’m not upset with you. I’m not upset with anyone. I accept your apology. Forget it. It’s fine,” I said. Wavering. *Do I stay? Do I go?*

“Would you like me to walk you over to see him?”

“No,” I said emphatically. That much I was sure of. I took a step away from Linda. The movement pushed one of the balls to my favorite spot, and I half closed my eyes with pleasure. “I’ll find him, thanks.”

“I’m really sorry, Kate.”

“It’s fine,” I said and hoped I didn’t sound as out of breath as I felt. “Really. Forget it.”

“Okay, I’m glad. I’m sure Brock will be happy to see you too.”

Not as happy as I will be to see him. I nodded and headed toward the trailer. The walk to the trailer felt excruciatingly good. The balls were moving back and forth with each step, and I worried I might orgasm before seeing Brock. I knocked on the door.

“Kate,” Brock warmly greeted me. “Come on in. You must be freezing in that dress.”

I shook my head. “No, this coat is warm.”

“Well, this is a nice surprise.”

I followed him inside the trailer office. “Do you mind if I sit?”

“Not at all,” he said and took a seat behind his own desk. “I didn’t expect to see you today. Did you need anything? Those movers I offered?”

I adjusted my purse on my lap so it would block his view. “No, I didn’t change my mind about them. I just came by to tell you how much fun I had last night.”

He gave me a lopsided grin, desire evident in those beautiful eyes of his. “We could have had more.”

I blushed and slid my hand through the hole where the pocket had been and then beneath the waistband of my skirt. The front of my thong was soaked with my own juices. I slid my finger into my wet slit and began to stroke my nub. “I hardly know you.”

He stood and pointed to the coffee machine behind him. “Let me get you some coffee. It’ll warm you up.”

I’m warming up already.

“Please, don’t go to any trouble for me,” I said, striving to sound normal as I secretly played with myself beneath my thick coat. “I’m fine.”

“It’s no trouble. It’s already made.” He poured a cup of coffee. “Sugar? Cream?”

I licked my bottom lip and fought to keep my eyes open as I caressed myself faster and faster, trying desperately to keep the motion located only in my hand. “Whatever you have. I’m not picky.” *But I am close to coming. Please, stay there at the coffee machine just a few more minutes.*

He didn’t. He walked over, sat on the edge of his desk and held the coffee cup out to me. “I figured your hands must be cold. If nothing else, this will warm them.”

I slid my right hand out of my skirt and took the coffee with my left hand. He was too close for me to continue, and I was torn between fleeing to my car where I could finish what I’d started or ripping off my clothes and begging him to finish it for me on his desk.

Mr. Elf’s instructions echoed in my head: *Nothing happens between you and that man unless I say so. You’re mine. Not his. Only fuck him if I tell you to.*

I adjusted my position so the balls moved within me, almost but not quite where I wanted them to be. When I wiggled again, the coffee sloshed over the side of my cup and spilled on my coat. I wiped at it with my other hand.

“Here, let me help you with that,” Brock said. He was beside me in a flash with a paper towel. He wiped the towel up and down the spill. His strong caress warmed my thigh even through the many layers of clothing.

How was it possible to want Brock more than I’d ever wanted my husband? His hands were large, strong—a workingman’s hands. I wanted to feel them on my skin, wanted his fingers where mine had been earlier. I grabbed his hand, stilling it.

Our eyes met and the air sizzled with our mutual desire. He stood in front of me, the evidence of his attraction to me staring me right in the eyes, so to speak. His cock was huge and straining against the front of his jeans. I wanted to release it. Taste it. I couldn't stop staring at it. Unlike my husband who had been tall and thin, Brock was ruggedly built. He was definitely strong enough to give me the wall-banging good time I'd raunchily claimed I wanted for Christmas.

What had Mr. Elf said? *"In nine days, you fuck ME."*

Brock was the fantasy I'd chosen to get off on all week, not the man I intended to sleep with. *Not that I'm going to sleep with Mr. Elf, either.*

Am I? If I'm that desperate for sex, wouldn't it make more sense to sleep with someone like Brock? Someone I know?

I dropped my hand. Nothing I was doing made sense, but that was what made it so freeing. The rules and etiquette I'd been raised with had been left behind and I was doing what I wanted for a change. And my bossy little elf was helping me discover what that was. I wasn't about to end that by sleeping with Brock.

"Is that a picture of your family behind your desk?" I asked with polite interest.

He glanced over his shoulder at it. "Yes."

"I'd love to see it."

He moved back behind his desk and retrieved it. "That's my parents, my sister, and me. I take it along wherever I'm working. It grounds me. Reminds me what's important. Want to see it?" He took a step as if he were coming back around the desk to me.

"Stay there. I can see it fine." With him once again behind his desk, I began to stroke myself. The fire from before burst through me, more intense from the teasing delay. I squirmed in my seat and let out an audible gasp as one of the balls shifted to vibrate on the exact spot I craved. Every cell in my body became more alive; my own touch felt hotter, wilder. I looked

at the rug as the sensation overtook me; my fingers stroked faster and faster. I fought to keep my eyes open. The first tingles of orgasm made me quiver in anticipation.

I'm so close.

“Are you okay, Kate? You look flushed.” He watched me closely but couldn't possibly know what I was doing.

“I'm fine,” I said. *So fucking close.* “Just fighting a cold.”

“That's common this time of year. I hope you feel better.”

I will in about thirty more seconds. “Tell me about this site. How long will you be working here?”

He started speaking, but I couldn't hear him. I held his eyes and gave myself over to the second mind-shattering orgasm I'd experienced in my life. It rose up within me, rocking through me, and I had to bite down on my lip to stop from crying out from the pleasure of it.

“How about you? How do you like being home?” he asked.

“Oh, it's good. It's so, so, so good,” I said and finished with a shudder.

He looked like he was holding himself back from saying something. It was a particular expression I'd never seen on his face before. There was a hunger there, something primal and excitingly dangerous. It was as if he knew what I'd been doing. *But he couldn't. If he had, he would have said something. Done something to betray that he knew.*

Like having a bulging erection?

I removed my hand from my skirt and searched his face. He looked like he wanted me, but he wasn't acting on it. No, he couldn't know what I'd done.

My euphoria should have ebbed after my climax, but sitting across from Brock, I felt the urge to strip naked and offer myself to him. I wanted to take him in my mouth, tasting him while he thrust inside me again and again. *These balls are*

making me nuts. Their continued vibration was almost more than I could take.

I don't even know who Mr. Elf is. Why shouldn't I take what I want? Why let him decide anything for me?

He'd promised, however, that things would get even better for me. What if they could? Could they get better than this? It was worth waiting to find out. I stood and said, "I have to go, Brock. I just came by to say it was nice to see you last night." I walked around his desk and planted a kiss on his cheek, not looking at him while I did. I couldn't. The hardest thing I'd ever done was walk away from him.

"Kate," he said just before I walked out the door.

I turned and looked at him. If he asked me to bend over for him right then, I would. I wasn't strong enough to deny him. "Yes?"

"Come by to see me anytime," he said. His cheeks were as flushed as mine.

"I will," I said, barely above a whisper, and bolted for my car.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Were You Good or Bad Today?

Brock

SOME DAYS FLEW by. Others dragged on. The rest of that day passed excruciating slowly, and trying to concentrate on anything after Kate's visit was an exercise in futility.

I still couldn't believe I'd been able to keep my hands off her as she played with herself in front of me. It had been sheer torture, but the kind that was too good to stop. At one point our eyes met, and I knew the two of us would have been ripping each other's clothing off and fucking on my desk with the slightest encouragement. Or my office floor. Just thinking about it gave me another painful ache in my balls. Luckily, as far as I knew, no man had died from such a condition.

As much as I'd seen desire in her eyes, I'd also watched her fight it. She'd held herself back because I'd told her to—well, Mr. Elf had. That insight was a powerful turn-on. What else would she do if I commanded her to?

I had to be patient. I could have my fun and the prize if I played this right. When she'd given me that final kiss on my cheek, the scent of her orgasm had been on her. It lingered in my office—or was it just that I wanted her so badly I couldn't get that heady scent out of my head? I should have told her to shake hands with me. Or better, to have somehow run a finger over my lips, dipped one in my mouth.

No, that would have been too obvious.

The crotch of my pants became uncomfortably tight again. I sent off a final email for the day, closed the office, and left without saying good-bye to my sister. She would have taken one look at my face and known I was hiding something. I

didn't keep many secrets from her, but nothing—nothing—was going to come between me and the game Kate and I were playing.

I was home in record time and naked in my bed shortly after that. I wouldn't contact her until seven. The wait was killing me. I spent the intervening time reading an erotic novella and jerking off.

I hadn't masturbated so much since I first discovered the joys of my own hand and lotion. I used so many tissues when I was fifteen that Mom had taken me to an allergist. The male doctor and I had exchanged a funny look when Mom had explained the reason for the visit. I'd sent a pleading look that had been read and understood: *Just go with it, dude.*

To Mom's amazement, the allergy tests had come back negative. She'd spoken to Dad about it and then never mentioned it again. I hadn't been able to look her in the eye for weeks after that.

One perk of becoming an independent adult is the freedom to masturbate in every room of your own apartment. More kids might move out early if more parents stressed that. *I would have.*

According to my married friends, that freedom was short-lived after vows were exchanged. A wife and kids brought otherwise bold men back to jerking off in their showers. Another reason to enjoy myself while I had the chance.

I picked up my prepaid phone.

H. E.: Were you good or bad today, Kate?

Kate: I was very bad.

H. E.: That's good. Did you do as I told you?

Kate: Yes, I did.

H. E.: Tell me about it. Tell me every last detail of it.

I had taken the edge off with two orgasms, thanks to the hot scenes in the novella, and it was a good thing. It allowed

me to leisurely stroke myself while I read her description of what she'd done in my office earlier. Her description was mostly fact, which only made my plans for that evening with her more exciting.

H. E.: Did you fuck him?

Kate: No. You told me not to.

H. E.: Good girl. No punishment tonight. All reward. Did you get my gifts?

Kate: Yes. I have them with me right now.

H. E.: Where are you?

Kate: I'm sitting on my bed with both boxes next to me.

H. E.: Are you naked?

Kate: No.

H. E.: You should always be naked when you talk to me. Get undressed, Kate.

Kate: I'm naked now, but it's cold so I put a blanket over me.

I laughed.

H. E.: You're so honest, Kate. I like that about you. I want you to be comfortable tonight. Open the smaller box first.

Kate: A VR headset?

H.E.: Yes, have you ever used one?

Kate: No.

H.E.: I've uploaded a movie to your headset. I'll walk you through how to watch a movie with me.

Kate: What kind of movie?

Instead of answering, I started giving her directions on how to use the headset. When I was convinced she'd be able to open it as well as get to the shared movie room I'd created, I told her to put the headset aside and open the second box.

Kate: The movie you want to watch with me—it's a porn, isn't it?

H. E.: Go open the second box.

Kate: I'm not into those movies.

H. E.: I don't care. Open the other box.

Kate: A vibrator. That's what I thought you'd give me on the first day.

Yeah, I'd played that one wrong. Nice wouldn't win Kate's heart.

H. E.: I'm glad you like it. You can also use it underwater.

Kate: Like in a bath?

H. E.: Yes, but not tonight. Tonight is about learning what you like.

Kate: I already know what I like.

H.E.: Really? Normally I would have accepted that claim, but there was a reason Kate was playing a game with someone she thought was a complete stranger. She was looking for more than she'd ever allowed herself. I was doing my best to deliver it. Besides, don't you want to hear my voice?

Kate: Your voice?

H.E.: I have my own VR headset. Sure, we'd both only be an avatar with very limited ability to interact, but I'd been careful to make my avatar look nothing like me. I'd still have to be careful with my voice, but the risk of being recognized made it even more exciting. I'll be right next to you on the couch.

Kate: You will?

H.E.: My avatar will be. Do you still have the Ben Wa balls in?

Kate: I do.

H. E.: Take them out. Turn on the video, but don't turn on the vibrator yet. Set yourself up on your bed with the headset on. Go into the room I created for us, but don't start the video. Do nothing until I join you. Are you ready Kate?

Kate: Yes.

H. E.: Yes, *Master*.

Kat: Yes, Master Elf.

I chuckled. *I'll accept that for now.* Naked, I put on my own headset and quickly entered the digital room I'd created for us. Every part of me was hyper alert, excited at a level beyond anything I'd experienced before. Mentally steeling myself to hold it together, I remembered to deepen my normal voice. When her avatar appeared beside me on the couch, I whispered, "Hi, Kate."

"Hi, Master Elf," she whispered back.

Had I been a gamer I might have been able to come up with a sexy avatar for her. I'd given her wilder blonde hair than she had, a short skirt and a curvy body. Nothing in the program I'd used came close to capturing the beauty of her, so I'd given up trying. For mine, I'd used futuristic features that had an industrial feel about them. If there'd been any elf options that hadn't been completely ridiculous, I might have chosen them. Despite the speed in which I'd thrown this experience together, I was optimistic that she'd enjoy it. "The video had really good reviews. It's about two women who start a phone-sex business. Listen to how they describe sex to the men. Tonight is about learning how to please me. If you do, your reward will be to come while I listen. Again and again, if you want."

Her avatar leaned away in surprise then its disconnected hands fluttered at her sides. I smiled as I imagined what that meant she was doing in reality with her controls. "If you think you can get me to talk dirty, you've got the wrong woman. That's not my style."

"Now that's a shame, to me there's nothing sexier than a woman who knows how to be a lady but also knows what to say to get me hot and bothered."

Rather than waiting for her response, I started the video. There wasn't a whole lot of plot to it. Pretty quickly one of the women was talking her way through her first phone call. As she spoke, she slid her hand down the front of her pants to touch herself.

“Well, that’s realistic,” Kate said with some disdain.

“It’s a fantasy, Kate. Let yourself enjoy it.”

When the woman began to tell the man on the phone in graphic detail how she’d want to be taken, Kate said, “I could never talk like that.”

“Why?”

“I would have no idea how to. Trust me, if I tried, you’d be much more amused than aroused.”

A quick look down at my fully erect cock told a different tale, but that wasn’t what she needed to hear. “You don’t have to try to be sexy, Kate. You already are. Stop wondering if I’d like something and simply trust that there isn’t anything you could say that I wouldn’t enjoy.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It is. Listen to what the women say. Then say it to me.”

“Oh, my God, is that woman going down on the other while she’s on the phone? Where did the other woman even come from?”

I chuckled. Men didn’t pick apart the plot of sex scenes. “Kate, sex is beautiful in many forms. The female body is beautiful. Let yourself enjoy watching something even if you wouldn’t want to do it yourself. It’s a fantasy. Imagine yourself in that chair, a woman between your legs, me on the phone. Feel her tongue lapping at your hot and wet sex. Her hair on your thighs. Her breath on your skin.”

Kate’s breathing became more and more ragged. “That is kind of hot.”

“It sure is.”

“She has the same vibrator you bought me.”

“I know.”

“I want to use it. Right now.”

“Not yet, Kate, just watch.”

The women in the video had moved on from the men on the phone to pleasuring each other.

Cock in hand, I felt the first tickling of another orgasm but resisted it. I wanted to wait for Kate.

When the first complete sex scene ended, I whispered, “Turn on your vibrator now. Use it on yourself while you tell me what you’d like me to do to you. Don’t come before I do. Then, only when I say so, you can join me.”

Kate was silent for a moment. Then she started to speak, tentatively at first, then with more confidence. “I’m lying here all alone, my pussy dripping wet, thinking of you and wishing you were beside me. I’m running my hands over my body, finding my nipples and squeezing them because they are so hard, so eager to be in your mouth. I want to touch myself right now, but I know I can’t because you haven’t allowed me, and you are my master. You come first. If you were here, I’d be begging to take you in my mouth. Kissing your length, tasting the tip, then putting you all the way in my mouth and sucking deeper while I run my hands hungrily over your balls.” She stopped. “How am I doing?”

I forgot to whisper. “Good. Keep going.”

“I am imagining Brock right now, is that okay?”

“That’s fine. Just keep talking.”

“You can come on my chest or in my mouth. Whatever you want, because I belong to you. Then I’ll lick you clean and start all over until you beg me to stop. When we finally kiss, I want your tongue to fuck my mouth while your cock fucks my pussy. I want you so deep inside me I won’t know where you end and I begin. And when you come inside me, I want you to whisper for me to join you so I can come with you.”

The image sent me over the edge. I dropped the phone, threw back my head, and shot my load all over the bed. Shaken by the intensity of my orgasm, it took a few minutes to

gather my sense enough to clean myself and pick up the phone again.

“How did I do?” Kate asked.

Damn. She was fucking perfect. “It was a good start,” I whispered. “You’ll get better. You did earn your reward, though.”

“You came?”

Hell, yes. I whispered, “No more questions. It’s your turn to listen. Keep that vibrator on, Kate, and let everything else fade away. Let me paint a fantasy for you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

If This Is Wrong . . .

Kate

BY DELAYING MY own pleasure, I'd increased it. A need pulsed through me, and I was a slave to it. I was almost too stimulated. I wanted to rush to orgasm, but didn't. I wanted to go wherever my master wanted to take me.

When he started to speak, his voice was a caress, more intimate and exciting than any I'd felt on my flesh. My skin tingled with each word. My thighs quivered with desire. I was so wet I didn't need lubrication to insert the vibrator; it slid into my eager sex and then out as I alternated where and how I touched myself with it.

"Close your eyes, Kate. I'm right beside you. You can feel my lips on your neck. On your gorgeous tits. I'm kissing you behind your ear, down your arm. I'm everywhere around you. Can you feel my lips on your stomach? My hot breath is tickling your pussy. Open wider for me, Kate. Let me in. I want to taste every sweet inch of you. Do you feel my fingers opening you wider? Your clit is begging for me. I lick it. I nip it. I can't get enough of you. I can't get deep enough into you. My tongue. It's long and thick. It fills you up. It's so hot. So wide. Can you feel it?"

"Yes," I whispered, and I could. I slid the vibrator in and out as he spoke and writhed beneath it. Having him there brought my pleasure to a whole new level.

"Your eager little clit needs me again. How do you like it? Rough like this? Or gentle like that? Do you like when I suck it?"

“Everything,” I said in a frenzy. “I like everything you’re doing.”

“I can’t wait anymore, Kate. I want to fuck you. Pump that toy in and out. That’s me. I’m fucking you right now, Kate. Take me deep. Take me hard. Make it almost hurt, because that’s how I want it.”

I pumped the vibrator in and out just as he commanded and an orgasm rose within me, driving me to thrash wildly against my own hand. I cried out for more until the orgasm overtook me. I gave myself over to it, sobbing as it consumed me.

I dropped the vibrator and lay there panting: hot, sweaty, and no longer in need of a blanket.

“Good night, Kate.” He left the digital room.

“Good night, Master,” I said, then slid my headset off.

It was difficult to say what I felt in the aftermath of an orgasm. Was it possible to feel sated and empty at the same time? My body was relaxed, my mind was racing.

I shouldn’t enjoy calling anyone Master.

Was there something wrong with me?

If what I was doing was so wrong, why did it feel so right?



I WENT FOR a walk early the next morning. It was unseasonably warm, and the sun felt good on my face. The cool air was invigorating. I felt light. Young. At peace with myself. I didn’t sit around waiting for a package to arrive. I knew one would while I walked to the convenience store a few blocks away.

A young mother dressed in a black jogging suit, her long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, approached me, pushing a double stroller. Normally I wouldn’t have made eye contact, worried what the woman thought of me or that I’d somehow say the wrong thing to her.

This time, I smiled and told the woman her babies were adorable. The woman gushed for the next ten minutes about her twin four-month-old boys. Then she said, “Kate, right? My name is Angie. I’ve been working up the courage to come say hi to you. It’s so wonderful to have another woman in the neighborhood, but I wasn’t sure if someone like you would want to hang out with a woman with children.”

“Someone like me?” I asked cautiously.

“You’re so beautiful and always put together. Half the time I can’t remember if I showered, never mind if I put on makeup.”

I laughed. “I can imagine those two keep you busy.”

“They do. And I’m not complaining, but when I told my husband I would stay home and raise them, I didn’t realize how lonely it could get. I love them, but I crave adult conversation now and then. If you’re ever looking for a walking buddy, please ask. I live just over there in the green house. I’d love the company.”

I exchanged phone numbers with Angie and walked away smiling. Passing a large house on the corner, I noticed an old man watching me from one of the first-floor windows. I waved at him and felt overjoyed when he waved back.

Coming upon a small shopping area nearby, I stopped to try a few samples from a bakery. They all tasted so delicious I couldn’t decide which was best, so I bought an assortment of several treats and walked out with a ridiculous amount of baked goods.

When I returned home, I scooped up the package on my doorstep. This one was considerably smaller than the others I’d received. It easily fit in my palm. I put my groceries away, then opened the box.

It contained one foil-covered condom. Had Mr. Elf changed his mind about waiting until day twelve? I didn’t know how I felt about ending our game early. The idea was

exciting, but I didn't actually know anything about him, and that made it difficult to imagine being with him.

Kate: I suppose I should be glad you practice safe sex.

His answer came a few minutes later.

H. E.: I do, but it's not for me.

Kate: I don't understand.

H. E.: Yesterday when you got yourself off in front of Brock, did you want to go further? Did you want to fuck him?

Kate: You know I did.

H. E.: How did it feel knowing you couldn't?

Kate: It was frustrating. Awful.

H. E.: And fucking wonderful, wasn't it? Last night you pictured him when you came, didn't you? It was his tongue, his cock, that fucked you last night, wasn't it?

Kate: You said that was okay.

H. E.: It is. I want you to want him. I want you so hot for him you can't keep your hands off your pussy when you're around him. And I want him to want you. I want him to crave what you will deny him. He can't have you, Kate. You're mine. Say it.

Kate: I can't belong to a man I don't know. I'm not sure I can belong to any man.

H. E.: You can and you do. Call your fantasy fuck today. Ask him to go somewhere with you. Take that condom with you.

Kate: Why would I do that when you just told me not to have sex with him?

H. E.: The condom is there to remind you how easy it would be to say yes to him. You can spread your legs for him anytime you want, Kate. But our time together ends when you do. So you won't. You won't use that condom because, even if you're not ready to admit it yet, you already belong to me. Spend time with Brock. Tease him. Tease yourself. Then send him home alone. Text me after he's gone and I'll show you what you should have done in the bathtub with my gift.

Kate: You want me to call him today? Ask him out? What makes you think he'll be free to see me?

H. E.: Trust me, Kate, he'll drop everything when you call.

Kate: Do you know him?

H. E.: I know men.

Kate: Should I use my Ben Wa balls?

H. E.: No. Keep it simple. You and him.

I picked up my regular phone and held it without dialing a number. My euphoria from the night before faded away. The game felt harmless when it was just about me, but this wasn't right.

Brock's sister said he likes me. I can't use him like this.

My opinion of myself lowered when I admitted to myself that I was more than a little tempted to see how Brock would respond if I flirted with him. I remembered how he'd looked at me when I'd visited his office. *He wants me. But enough to come over today simply because I ask him to?*

I warmed all over at the possibility that he would.

But would I feel the same without the balls inside me? I placed the condom in the front pocket of my jeans. I remembered the cruel things my husband had said about how boring I was in bed. He didn't know me, had never known me.

I could be just as sexy and dangerous as any woman.

I think.

Kate: I'll do it, but only because I'm curious.

H. E.: About?

I didn't owe him the truth, so I typed: About how much of my excitement around him is from the toys and how much is because of him.

Master Elf took a long moment to respond.

H. E.: Call him. Find out. Then text me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Not *That* Nice

Brock

I PLOWED THROUGH my emails while waiting for Kate's call. I'd already cleared my schedule for the day. My project was coming along without a hitch, which freed me up to concentrate on Kate.

I was still flying by the seat of my pants when it came to what to give her each day. My goal was: make sure that by the time I revealed myself on the twelfth day she was as much into the real me as she was into the version of me she liked to call Mr. Elf.

I still preferred the title Master Elf.

Master had a nicer ring to it, but really I was willing to settle for any title that would get her into my bed—and ensure she didn't leave once she found out what I'd been up to.

I believed that sending the condom was a stroke of inspired genius. I'd seen it as a win-win. If she couldn't help herself and slept with me, I'd get to fuck her earlier. If she held strong and spent the day with me, getting to know me without sleeping with me, I'd still find pleasure later that night.

I was shocked when she said she might only be attracted to me because she was horny from the toys I'd sent her. I hadn't considered that possibility. Some men would have been intimidated by that revelation.

Those men would never fuck a woman like Kate. Men ruled by their egos were weak. I saw them all the time in the business world. They made hasty decisions based on how they felt instead of keeping their eyes on the prize.

Kate needed a strong man.

A smart man.

Someone who saw challenge as the ultimate foreplay.

Don't know if you're attracted to me, Kate? Then let me show you exactly why you should be. Let Mr. Elf wow you with his knowledge of appliances and sexual dominance. I've been told these eyes could melt panties off a grandmother.

Okay, that is not a pleasant mental image.

I took out my cell phone and checked if I'd missed her call. *Come on, Kate. You know you want to spend the day with me. You have my number. Call me.*

At noon Linda dropped by and asked me if I wanted to join her for lunch. I told her I was too busy, but that was a lie. I'd answered every email and made every phone call. On any other day, I would have left the trailer and walked the work site, but I didn't want to miss Kate's call.

My sister returned an hour later with a turkey sandwich and a soda for me.

"What are you working on?" Linda asked.

I took a large bite and shrugged. "The usual."

"Anything I can help you with?"

I shook my head adamantly and took another bite. With my sister, the less said the better. She was too good at reading me.

"So, I was thinking . . ." Linda said.

With a mouth full, I answered, "That's dangerous."

"I like Kate. I think Mom and Dad would too."

I choked on my sandwich and reached for my drink, then coughed and took another sip. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been thinking a lot about what she said to me in the supermarket. She lost her mother and her husband this past year. That means this is her first Christmas alone."

I hadn't thought of it that way. Honestly, I hadn't thought about much since I'd read her letter besides fucking her. "I suppose it is."

"Even if the two of you don't end up dating, we should invite her to spend Christmas with us."

"There is nothing between Kate and me."

Linda rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. Misty Falls might be a city, but it's a small one. People talk. Everyone already knows you like her. She seems to like you. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out where the two of you are headed."

"What else are people saying?" I watched Linda's expression closely and was relieved when she answered with pursed lips, as she did when she was lying.

"Nothing, really. Just that they saw the two of you dancing one night. The women can't understand what you see in her, but the men all do."

I stood and tossed the remainder of my lunch in the trash. "If you spent less time gossiping and more time billing our customers, we could afford to start on that mill in Massachusetts."

"Touchy, touchy. I'm not giving you shit about liking her. I just wanted to tell you if you want to bring her to Christmas Eve at our house, or Christmas breakfast—we'd all be cool with that."

"All? Why do you say that like you're also speaking for Mom and Dad?"

"I told you everyone knows." She threw her hands up in frustration. "It's like you don't listen when I speak." She shook her head and walked out of the trailer.

I paced back and forth, debating what to do next. I couldn't text Kate as Mr. Elf and order her to call without giving myself away. I didn't want to contact her as Brock—that took the fun out of her asking me out.

I just have to wait.

She'll call.

I grabbed my coat and did a site inspection, checking my phones periodically, but neither showed a missed call or message.

By three o'clock I was crawling out of my skin. Returning to the trailer, I laid both phones on the desk and frowned.

I picked up my regular phone and called Kate. It rang several times before she answered.

"Hello?"

"Kate, it's Brock."

"Oh, hi, Brock."

There was a strain in her voice that put me on high alert. "Are you okay?" She sniffed and I knew instantly that she wasn't. "What happened, Kate?"

"Nothing," she said in a defeated, shell-shocked tone.

"I'm coming over."

She didn't say no, so I took that as a yes. I hung up, grabbed my coat, and bolted to my car. I was ringing her doorbell twenty minutes later.

When she opened the door, her eyes were puffy from crying, and her nose was bright red. There was a shine to her cheeks as if she'd just wiped them dry. I pulled her to my chest, and she didn't resist. She stood in my embrace, shaking but not crying. I hugged her tighter. For a few minutes she didn't move, then she let out a sad little sound, wrapped her arms around my waist, and burst into tears. I didn't know what the hell had happened to her, but whatever it was, I would make it right. Whatever it took.

I lifted her up, carried her into her house, and kicked the door closed behind us. I walked over to her couch and sat down, cradling her in my lap. "Tell me what happened, Kate. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

She hid her face in my chest. "It's too stupid to explain."

As she shifted on my lap, my cock sprung to life beneath her delicious little ass. *Not now*, I chastised my wayward appendage. But it felt so good to hold her. I could smell shampoo and her light scent and was painfully aware of every single place our bodies touched. Every fucking place. I stroked a hand up and down her back to comfort her, and even that caress had my thoughts going wild. I wanted to rip her shirt off and expose the breasts she so innocently pressed against my chest.

I need serious fucking help.

I shifted her so she was no longer seated directly on my erection. “It’s not stupid if it upsets you. Just say it. Whatever it is. Most things aren’t as bad as they seem in our heads.”

She wiggled again, rubbing my cock with her thigh as she shifted so she could look up at him. *Except this. This is fucking torture.*

“I received my final divorce papers today. I signed them and sent them back. It’s done.” Tears gave her big blue eyes an added shine. “I knew they were coming, and it’s what I wanted. Why did it hurt so much to sign them?”

Letting out a long sigh, I pulled her against my chest again, tucking her beneath my chin. “Do you still love him?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. I mean, how can you love someone when you realize everything you thought you knew about them was a lie?” Her words stabbed through me and for the first time made me question the final outcome of this game with her. As I fought off a mild inner panic, Kate continued, “He said he loved me, but he didn’t. He was a collector of beautiful things, and I think I was simply another item he collected. We barely even had sex. My only job was to look good around his friends. When my mother became ill I saw how little patience he had for anything that wasn’t beautiful.”

I continued to rub Kate’s back slowly, telling myself I was nothing like her ex. I’d always cared about Kate. *I want to get*

to know her. I'm willing to talk to her as long as she wants—after I fuck her brains out.

I'm an asshole.

“I’m sorry, Kate.” I was sure she thought I was sorry for what she was going through, but I was equally sorry I couldn’t turn off my need for her. I wanted to comfort her—all night long, and in as many ways as our stamina allowed.

See, that's why I'm an asshole.

She leaned back and looked up at me again, and I groaned as it put her right back on my traitorously swollen cock. “No, I’m sorry. I hardly know you, and I’m blubbering all over you. You don’t want to hear about any of this.”

Strength. Give me strength. “I want to hear about whatever you want to talk about.”

She put a hand up on my cheek. “It’s not fair of me to take advantage of you this way.”

Take advantage. Take any fucking thing you want. Keep wiggling that little ass now and then, and I'll sit here all fucking day listening to whatever. “I don’t mind.”

“It’s kind of obvious that you like me, Brock.”

Attempting to look cool, I raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Unless that’s a flashlight in your pocket.”

I covered my face with one hand, groaned, then half smiled at her. “In my defense, you squirm a lot.”

Kate laid a hand on my chest and smiled sadly. “I wish I had met you before all of this. Or six months from now. You’re such a n—”

I grabbed her hand. “Don’t say it. Trust me, I’m not as nice as you think I am.”

She held my eyes and nodded. “Yes, you are. You’re everything I should want, but I’m not ready for you. I’m still

angry. Angry with Wayne. Angry at myself. Do yourself a favor and don't trust me right now. I'll only hurt you."

"I'm a big boy, Kate. You don't have to worry about me."

Kate slid off my lap. "Yes, I do. You know why? Because I like you. I like you a lot, Brock. And if I'm not honest with you, how does that make me any better than Wayne? I don't think we should see each other anymore."

I stood up. "Nobody is perfect, Kate. People make mistakes and forgive each other all the time. It's called life."

Kate walked to the door. "I'm sorry, Brock. I wish I could explain this better, but I can't. Just trust me. You need to stay away from me."

I followed her to the door and looked down at her. "I'll do that if you do one thing for me."

She bit her bottom lip and looked up at me nervously. "What?"

"Kiss me. Just once."

The tip of her tongue flicked across her teeth. "What will that prove?"

"Maybe nothing." I pulled her hips to mine and ground her against my bulging cock. "Just one kiss, Kate." I bent down and licked her parted lips, teasing them to open. "You owe me at least that."

Burying a hand in the back of her hair, I took her mouth boldly, thrusting my tongue deep and circling hers. She placed her hands on my shoulders, holding me to her rather than pushing me away. I had spent so many hours imagining how she'd taste, but the reality was so much better.

I couldn't get enough. I lifted her and forced her against the door. I stepped forward as the door slammed against the wall behind her. She wrapped her legs around my waist and I ground my pelvis against hers with a rhythm as old as time itself. Shoving a hand down the back of her jeans, I grabbed one of her ass cheeks.

I tore my mouth from hers and kissed my way down her neck and to one of her hard and protruding nipples. Right through her clothing and bra, I closed my teeth around her hardened nub and gave it a gentle tug. She gasped, and her hands tightened on my shoulders.

Everything in me wanted to kick the door closed and take her right there on the rug in the hallway. But even in her aroused state, her nose was still pink from her earlier crying, and I knew I could win now but lose in the long run if I pushed her.

I eased her back to the floor and took a deep breath. “Do what you need to do, Kate. I know you’re not in a good place right now. I don’t care. We don’t have to rush, but I’m not going anywhere. I’m not *that* nice.”

I gave her one final quick kiss and walked out the door. My balls were aching. My head was aching. I was pretty positive that when it came to winning Kate’s heart, I had fucked up my chances as much as any man could.

But that just made me more determined to have her.

I’d never been a quitter.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What If I Told You To?

Kate

I WAS STILL a bundle of nerves hours after Brock left. I'd tried to do the right thing. I'd warned him to stay away from me. But he wouldn't listen. *He has no idea what a tangled game he's entering into.*

My prepaid phone vibrated with an incoming message, but I ignored it, poured myself a glass of wine, and sat down on the couch with both phones in front of me on the coffee table.

One nice guy.

One possibly psychotic sexual deviant.

The choice should be easy enough.

Why is life so much more fucking complicated than it has to be? What is it Mr. Elf gives me that I need? Do I think I don't deserve a good man? Am I that cookie cutter stereotypically pathetic?

Or am I just a sex freak myself, and I never knew it? What would a man like Brock think if I told him I have sex every night with a man I've never met?

The phone vibrated again. I picked it up and checked the messages on it.

H. E.: You didn't text me, Kate. I don't like it when you disappoint me.

Kate: I'm not in a good mood today. Maybe we should talk tomorrow.

H. E.: Do you think I give a shit about your mood, Kate? Are you naked?

Kate: No.

H. E.: I told you to always be naked when we talk.

Kate: You contacted me. I didn't contact you.

H. E.: You want to be punished tonight, don't you, Kate? Do you feel guilty about something? I like it when you feel guilty. Tell me what you did, and I'll choose the perfect punishment.

Kate: I don't want Brock to be part of our game. I don't want to lead him on.

H. E.: Oh, you like him.

Kate: No.

H. E.: Did you fuck him?

Kate: No. I wanted to, but I told him to stay away from me instead.

H. E.: And what did he say?

Kate: He said he doesn't care if I'm fucked up in the head. Or something like that. But he doesn't know about you.

H. E.: Did you tease him?

Kate: I started to. I mean, there I was, crying my eyes out over my fucking ex-husband and loving that I could feel Brock's cock grow every time I rubbed myself against it. I don't know if I was doing it for you, for me, or for him. It was fucking crazy.

H. E.: Were you thinking about me when you were with him?

Kate: Yes. No. Not the way that sounds. I hate that I have you. I hate that I like what we're doing.

H. E.: Stand up. Get undressed. Now.

Kate: No.

H. E.: I love it when you say no because it makes your yes that much sweeter later. You didn't text me. You tried to ruin my game by telling Brock to stay away from you. You need to be punished, Kate. You need to remember how this game is played. Right now you're getting wet just thinking about what I could have planned. Why fight it, Kate? I'm waiting. The longer you make me wait, the worse your punishment will be.

I unbuttoned my jeans and stepped out of them, then brought my shirt up over my head and threw it to the floor. There was something freeing about throwing my bra and panties across the room.

Kate: I'm naked.

H. E.: Good. Now, go find your computer, Kate. Take it to your bathroom. Put it on a table at an angle that allows me to see you in the tub. Remember the waterproof toy I sent you? Take that, too.

Kate: I'm not going to video anything I do with you.

H. E.: Yes, you are. You don't have to show your face, but you will set your computer up so I can see you. So I can see everything.

Kate: There is no way I'd do that.

H. E.: Kate, you don't have a choice. You've been a bad girl. Go set everything up. Invite this address to video chat with you. You won't see me, but you'll be able to hear me, and I'll tell you what to do next.

Although it was far outside anything I would normally do, I set my bathroom up just as Mr. Elf had instructed. Each step got me more and more excited. When I knew he could hear me, I said, "Should I fill the tub?"

"No," he answered in a voice that sounded computer generated.

"I like your new voice."

"I don't care what you like, Kate. Get in the tub."

"Now, without water?"

"Yes, I want you on that cold tub, with your legs spread wide open. Make sure I can see everything. But not your face. I don't care about your face."

I climbed into the tub and adjusted my computer. It was cold and awkward, but I did as I was told. My hand went instantly to my sex and started stroking it.

"Did I say you could touch yourself, Kate?"

I stopped.

“Good,” he said. “I want you to think about Brock.”

“No.”

“Kate, you’re not being a good girl for me. Turn on the cold water. As cold as you can get it.”

I did.

“Put your pussy right under that water.”

Possibly because I felt I deserved the discomfort, I did and gasped. It was uncomfortably cold and surprisingly exciting at the same time.

“That’s enough,” he said. “Now, turn it off, and don’t say no to me again. Do you understand, Kate? I don’t like the word no.”

“I understand,” I whispered.

“Good. Use the vibrator, Kate, and while you do I want you to describe what it would be like to fuck Brock.”

I turned the vibrator on and laid it against my already excited clit. “He’s strong. So strong. He can pick me up easily. His cock is huge. I felt it so many times today. I wanted to touch it, taste it. When he was kissing me and my legs were around him, I wanted to feel him inside me. I wanted him to hold me there and fuck me until I couldn’t think anymore.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“No.”

“Good, make him work for it.”

“I’m not going to see him again.”

“You shouldn’t have said that, Kate. Turn the vibrator off.”

I did.

“Tell me, Kate. Would you fuck Brock if I told you to?”

I wanted to say yes to please him, but I whispered, “No.” I liked Brock. The idea of him becoming more involved in our

game made me uncomfortable.

“I know how to change your mind. Get out of the tub. That’s it. Use your hand to stroke yourself. It’s good, isn’t it? But not as good as your toy. But you don’t deserve the toy, Kate. Not when you say no to me. Stick a finger inside yourself. Pump it. In and out. Yes. Just like that. Now another finger. It’s not enough is it? You want more? Go ahead. Pick up the vibrator, but don’t turn it on. Put it all the way in. Deeper. Now pull it out. It’s all nice and wet from you. Rub it back and forth down you like I would do if I were there. Good. Now ram it in deep. Again. Again. Don’t turn it on. You don’t deserve that pleasure tonight, do you? Not yet. Keep pumping that vibrator in and out. Each time it enters you I want you to imagine that’s Brock’s cock. It feels good, doesn’t it? You want more, don’t you? You want to turn on your toy, but you can’t. Not yet. First you have to apologize for not texting me earlier.”

Writhing back and forth while seated on the edge of the tub, I whimpered, “I’m sorry.”

“Master. Call me Master.”

“Master.”

“Good. Now you can turn on your toy.”

I did and, because I was already so excited, the intense pleasure it sent through me was almost painful. I tilted the vibrator so it connected with my most sensitive inner spot. I leaned back and alternated thrusting it deep with rubbing it against my clit. “I’m close.”

“When you come, Kate, I want you to call out Brock’s name.”

“You’re a sick bastard.”

“Do it, Kate, or turn off your toy. Your choice.”

I sobbed as an orgasm began to sweep through me. I wanted to deny him, but I craved release like a suffocating

person craves air. As wave after wave of pleasure rocked my body, I cried out, “Brock. Fuck me, Brock. Fuck me.”

I came back down to earth and dropped the toy on the floor. I turned the computer so it faced the wall. “How many days do we have left of your little game?”

“Seven,” he answered.

“After that, I don’t want to do this anymore. Do you understand? We’re done after that.”

“Your choice, Kate. Like everything else we do, it’s always your choice.”

I slammed the laptop closed.

The phone vibrated beside it.

H. E.: Take a hot bath now, Kate. You earned it.

I didn’t answer, but filled the tub with hot water, added some bath soaps to create a mountain of bubbles, and turned on the soothing music he’d sent me. Like any addiction, being with Mr. Elf was beginning to leave me feeling better and worse at the same time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It's My Choice

Kate

THE NEXT MORNING, I wasn't surprised to find the usual gold-wrapped gift tied with a red velvet ribbon on my doorstep. I was, however, surprised I didn't have the urge to open it. I took it into the house and, instead of ripping it open, placed it on the kitchen counter and walked away.

Signing divorce papers had sent me into a tailspin the day before. In letting go, I'd been forced to remember why I'd left Wayne, and it hadn't been only his infidelity. No, I'd left because of how he'd looked at me when I'd confronted him about the other women. He didn't care that he had hurt me or lied to me. My feelings were not important to him, not as important as the inconvenience of my anger.

It had been during that bout of anger that Wayne had said hateful, hurtful things to me. He'd blamed me for everything, saying my lack of skill in the bedroom had driven him to cheat. I had told him he was wrong, but part of me had believed him. I now realized being with Mr. Elf was about proving Wayne wrong.

I couldn't say I hadn't enjoyed Mr. Elf. Each day had been more exciting than the last. I'd been looking forward to discovering where else he could take me.

Something changed, though, when his game started involving Brock. I knew how it felt to be treated callously by someone who didn't care if he hurt me. I couldn't do that to Brock.

Did that mean my time with Mr. Elf was over? I didn't know, but I did know we were not moving forward until I

spoke to him about it.

Kate: You there?

H. E.: Did you get my gift, Kate?

Kate: I did. I didn't open it. I haven't decided yet if I will.

H. E.: You will, Kate.

Kate: We need to talk. I have something I need to say to you. And you need to listen. If you tell me you don't care how I feel about this, this will be the last time we ever speak. I mean it.

Mr. Elf took his time answering, but when he did his text read: I'm listening.

Kate: The first couple times we were together, it was fun. But yesterday, I felt worse after being with you instead of better. I need time to think before I agree to continue this.

Mr. Elf didn't respond.

Kate: Do you even care how I feel?

H. E.: Kate, you didn't ask for a relationship, you asked for a good old-fashioned, mind-blowing fuck.

Kate: I did. But you crossed the line when you involved someone else in our game. I don't care how fucked up I am in my own head, I won't take it out on someone else.

H. E.: What are you saying, Kate? You care about that guy?

Kate: I do, too much to be talked into doing anything that would ever hurt him.

H. E.: Are you telling me you want to fuck him more than you want to play with me?

Kate: No. I'm telling you I need time to think. You can keep sending me gifts, but I won't open them. Not today. Maybe not tomorrow. I have to clear my head. I have to figure out what I want. I'll text you when I do.

H. E.: As always, it's your choice, Kate.

Kate: Yes, it is my choice. I finally see that.

I put the prepaid phone on the counter next to the unopened gift and walked away from both. I wasn't ready to close the door on either, but I meant what I said about needing time to sort things out.

I went upstairs to Mom's bedroom and sat on the edge of her bed. I remembered begging her to stay with me even when I knew she was ready to pass. I'd turned a blind eye to the signs that Wayne was cheating until they had become too obvious to ignore. Neither situation had been within my control, and that realization had terrified me.

Everything I loved about my life could be ripped away from me, and there was nothing I could do about it. My feelings from both experiences washed over me. Helpless. Angry. Ashamed I hadn't been a stronger person in either situation.

But I'm not helpless.

I'm not weak.

My time with Mr. Elf had proven something else: It takes two to make a boring sex life. I found more sexual satisfaction in the short time with a stranger on a cell phone than I had in my entire marriage. I didn't regret a single moment I'd spent with whoever Mr. Elf was. He'd opened my eyes to the joys of fantasy and the pleasure I found in my own body.

He'd encouraged me to test my boundaries, to leave my comfort level behind, and that was a philosophy I was determined to adopt in other areas of my life. He'd also taught me that giving up control as part of a game was exciting but giving it up for real was something I wasn't willing to ever do again.

I can never go back to who I was before, and that's a good thing.

Mom had always told me a lady doesn't fight.

You were wrong, Mom.

Sometimes even ladies have to kick a little ass.

It's time for me to figure out what I want. Not what you wanted for me, Mom. Not what Wayne, or the man who found my Christmas wish, thought I wanted. It's not up to you or to them.

How I live and how I feel—it's my choice.

I won't leave this town just because people here don't like me. I'm going to pack up your stuff, Mom, but not until I'm ready to. And I'm not ready yet. There is not a single part of you I'm willing to give, or throw, away. Deal with it.

I stood and walked to the door. I know you wanted more for me than you had, Mom. For some reason, you thought I would find that if I married someone with money. I understand you wanted me to be happy, and I'm sorry I didn't fit into the life you'd hoped I'd live.

I looked at the navy pants I'd put on that morning without thinking. I don't know where I'll end up, but I need to find what makes me happy, Mom.

I closed the door behind me and went in search of my phone. I dialed it and said, "Angie, I was wondering if you wanted to take a walk with me today."

"I'd love to," Angie said in a gush. "Let me get the boys ready. Come on over. I'm so glad you called. I need some fresh air—I'm going crazy inside my house."

"Me too," I said and smiled. "Me too."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Too Far

Brock

I WAS MISERABLE all day at work. I yelled at the site manager when I heard there would be a delay in the flooring for the main building's basketball court. I yelled at my sister when she came in to see why I was in such a bad mood. She'd left looking more concerned than angry, which only made me feel worse.

And I already felt bad enough.

I'd fucked up, and I knew it. I had taken the game too far. My original plan had been to have an exciting fantasy with her via the phone while getting to know her as myself. In my mind I had imagined revealing the game to her on the twelfth day. I thought if I played everything just right she would realize I was much more than the nice guy she had always seen. We might have even laughed about the whole thing.

Yesterday, when I'd sensed my plan was falling apart, I panicked and went too far. She'd told me she could never love a man who lied to her and I'd realized I could never tell her the truth. I had been blindsided when she told me she didn't want to see me anymore. I had strategized that, if I escalated our fantasy, it would make a nice guy suddenly seem like a better option.

And to be honest, the power of knowing she would do whatever I asked had gone to my head—and my cock. Our game was fun, more exciting than anything I'd done before, and I hadn't wanted it to end. She'd been crying before I arrived. I should have thought more about how she felt than about what my dick wanted. I should have called our game off

for one night. Maybe I should've confessed and admitted to her that my game had really only been about wanting to be with her. Instead, I put my needs ahead of hers and because of that, I might have lost her.

She wasn't happy with Brock or Mr. Elf.

What the fuck do I do now?

I ended my workday early and went to Kate's house. She wasn't home so I sat on the front steps and waited. I was cold and uncomfortable, but I wasn't leaving until I spoke to her.

I saw her walking down the street and stood. She approached me cautiously, both hands tucked in the pockets of her short jacket. "I couldn't stay away, Kate. There is something I have to tell you." She looked at me with the sweetest, largest blue eyes I'd ever seen, and I'd never felt more like an ass than I did in that moment. "I'm sorry about yesterday."

She shrugged one shoulder. "Don't be. You didn't do anything wrong."

I stepped closer to her. "I did everything wrong. You were upset, and I was a selfish prick."

She shrugged again. "I've met worse. In fact, I just divorced one." She smiled sadly. "That joke sounded funnier in my head." She met my eyes and said, "I was just as much at fault for yesterday as you were. Coming home has been strange for me. I'm sorry if I'm sending you mixed signals."

"I like you, Kate."

"I like you too, but . . ."

"Does it have to be more complicated than that?"

She brought a hand up to her lips as if remembering our kiss. "I meant what I said yesterday, Brock. I'm so confused. I feel like I let my life get out of control, and I need to find my footing again. That's not a good time to start seeing someone. Trust me, I'm much more fucked up than I look."

I sat down on her steps. “You think you’re the only one? I’m a fucking mess on the inside. I just hide it beneath this handsome face and amazing smile.”

Kate reluctantly returned my smile and sat down beside me. “You do have a nice smile.”

“You should see my other parts. It’s too cold to show you my favorite one right now. You wouldn’t get the best impression of it.” I glanced at her and wiggled my eyebrows.

She laughed. “Keep it in your pants, buddy.”

I rounded my eyes as if her comment shocked me. “I was referring to my six-pack abs that are ghostly white in the winter. What did you think I meant?”

Kate shook her head and laughed again. “I guess I have a dirty mind.”

Pretending to be serious, I said, “I have never considered that a fault in a woman.”

“Thank you for coming over yesterday when you knew I was upset.”

“I’ll always come when you need me, Kate. I care about you.” As I said the words, I realized how much I meant them.

Kate picked a leaf off the bush beside her and folded it carefully again and again. “I don’t know what there’s been to like lately.”

For the first time since I’d read her letter, my desire to hold her had nothing to do with wanting to have sex with her. I put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer to me. “Do you remember the first summer we met? Before you, I couldn’t understand why anyone would hang out with a girl. But we had fun, didn’t we? It didn’t matter how different we were. Being with you made me happy. I missed you after that summer.”

Kate laid her head on my shoulder. “My mother hated seeing me in jeans. Especially the dirty jeans she always found

in the hamper after I'd been outside playing with you. That summer was fun. I missed you too."

"There has to be a reason we keep coming in and out of each other's lives."

Kate tensed beneath my arm. "Brock, I wish I were in a better place right now."

"You will be, Kate. This is a rough time for you, but you'll come out of it. I want you to know you don't have to be alone as you work things out. I'm right here. If you need a friend, I can be a friend for now. If you want more, just sit on my lap again."

She looked up at me quickly. "It's that simple?"

I shrugged. "Guys are not that complicated." I stood and held out a hand to her. "Hey, let's go to dinner. No expectations. Just you, me, and an extra-large pizza. We'll drown your sorrows in carbs."

She placed her hand in mine and stood before me, searching my face. "You're really okay with taking it slowly?"

I pulled her to my chest and kissed her temple. "You're worth the wait, Kate. You always have been. Let's go eat."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A Really, Really Good Guy

Kate

I SPENT THE next few evenings with Brock. He took me to a holiday party hosted by a married couple, Chris and Kim, he'd known since high school. He introduced me as a very good friend of his.

Chris elbowed Brock and said, "A friend, huh? Isn't this the Kate you mooned over for years? You know, Untouchable ___"

His wife glared at him and interrupted, "Do you want to ever have sex again, Chris?"

"Yes," Chris said and frowned.

"Then stop talking."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking." He blushed. "Kate, I didn't mean any offense. It's just what everyone called you."

Brock became visibly upset beside me, but for once the label didn't bother me. I felt free from the old nickname. What others thought didn't matter to me, not since Mr. Elf had shown me what I felt was more important.

Kim said, "Kate, I'm so sorry. Chris, that is your last eggnog. You're cut off."

I surprised them all by smiling. "It doesn't bother me anymore. Those people didn't know me."

Brock hugged me, and I felt a smile on his lips when he kissed my forehead.

"See," Chris said, "she's not upset, and I just got Brock to admit they are more than friends."

Kim looked across at me and smiled. “He’s incorrigible, but I love him.”

Chris let out a whoop. “No couch for me tonight.”

Meeting the rest of Brock’s friends that night had been just as entertaining. Watching him with them warmed my heart. Brock loved these people, and it was easy to see they loved him right back.

The next night, Brock surprised me by inviting me to have dinner with his parents. When I hesitated, he said, “My parents are fun. Well, most of the time. Don’t let my dad start talking about local politics. And if my mom offers you a piece of meat pie, ask her what year it was made. She doesn’t label things well in the freezer. Just avoid the meat pie altogether.”

“Who will you tell them I am?”

“The truth. You’re Kate, a woman I want to introduce to the joys of canasta.”

“What’s canasta?”

“It’s an addictive card game. My family has always played it. I have to warn you, though. We’re cutthroat. Don’t bat those pretty blue eyes at me and think I’ll go easy on you. It’s men against women when we play cards, and the losers always do the dishes.”

Brock’s parents met us at the door. His father was tall, with a full head of white hair and blue-green eyes like Brock’s. His mother was much shorter with salt-and-pepper hair cut in a flattering short style and dark brown eyes. I wasn’t sure how to read either of them.

Linda waved warmly from behind them and loudly told the woman she stood beside not to embarrass Brock in front of me.

Brock placed his hand low on my back and ushered me inside.

“Marty, offer to take her coat,” Brock’s mother said to her husband.

“Sharon, I’m not putting on airs just because she’s here. She can hang up her own coat if she wants to.”

Brock’s hand had tensed on my back, but I smiled over my shoulder at him. “Don’t worry, Brock; old people don’t offend me.”

His father had coughed and turned a little red. “Did you just call me old?”

I gave him my best mischievous smile and shrugged. “I did, but you deserved it.”

He studied me for a moment, then said, “I could like this one, Brock.”

“Enough to let her in the house, Marty?” His wife rolled her eyes but hugged her husband.

Marty nodded and stepped back. Once everyone was inside, he’d held out his hand for my coat. “Well, what are you waiting for? Give me your damn coat or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

I took one look at his serious expression and burst out laughing. Brock had joined in, followed by the rest of them. Linda came over like a long-lost friend, gave me a welcome hug, and introduced me to their aunt Stella.

Good food and plenty of wine turned the awkwardness of our initial meeting into a surprisingly pleasant evening. Brock’s parents were warm and loving toward each other. After dinner, his father joked they should play so the loser would leave with his sister-in-law.

No one took him seriously. Not even Aunt Stella. She did, however, threaten to stay another week if he kept it up. The easy banter between them made me wish I had a family like that.

And someone like Brock to share it with. He was protective, tender, and attentive. There was nothing not to love about spending time with Brock. He took me to the movies.

Took me shopping. We went everywhere, but he made sure we were never alone.

Which was more than a little frustrating. I told him I wanted to take it slowly, but he didn't even try to kiss me when he dropped me off at my door each night. At first I thought I didn't want him to, because it would lead to something I wasn't ready for, but the more time we spent together, the more kissing him again was all I could think about.

There'd been a time when I believed I had a low sex drive. *Ha, now sex is all I think about. And not with just anyone—with Brock.* I wanted to shake him. Or tie him down and take what I wanted. Being so close to him without kissing him kept me at an aching level of frustration.

He said all it would take was a sign from me that I was ready. I wasn't sure at first what held me back from giving him that sign, but I came face-to-face with it when I was cleaning my home one weekend morning.

I found the unopened gift box and the phone I'd stashed in a kitchen drawer the first night Brock had come over to pick me up. I'd told myself to throw them both away, but I hadn't. There was something about Mr. Elf I wasn't ready to let go of yet.

I took the prepaid phone in to the living room, along with the small box and texted.

Kate: Thank you.

His response came almost instantly.

H. E.: For what?

Kate: For listening to me when I asked you to stop.

H. E.: Our game was never supposed to hurt you, Kate.

Kate: I know. And it didn't. In fact, it freed me. I never knew I could be like that. I didn't know I could enjoy sex as much as I did with you.

H. E.: What are you saying? You want to continue our game?

Kate: Yes. No. I want everything I had with you, but I want it with Brock.

H. E.: Then why are you talking to me, Kate?

Kate: He's not like you. He'd be shocked if I told him what I want to do with him.

H. E.: I doubt that.

Kate: I can't even get him to kiss me.

H. E.: Then he's an idiot.

Kate: He's not an idiot. He's a good guy. A really, really good guy. He makes me laugh. He has brought so much happiness into my life in such a short time. I can't imagine not knowing him now. And I trust him, more than I've ever trusted anyone. But what if that's not enough for me? What if I need someone who can push my boundaries sometimes? What if I sleep with him and wish it were you?

There was no message from Mr. Elf for several minutes.

H. E.: You don't really want me. You don't know me. Are you attracted to Brock? I mean, do you want him to fuck you long and hard, over and over again?

Kate: I do. And I want my toys. And naughty phone calls. I want to meet him in places that would shock most people and fuck his brains out. But how do I tell him that?

H. E.: Any way you want. I'm sure if he's a man at all, he'll figure it out.

Kate: Should I tell him about you?

H. E.: No. Some things are better left a secret, Kate. I'm one of those things.

Kate: It's day twelve, Mr. Elf.

H. E.: I know.

Kate: I'm sorry we aren't spending today the way you thought we would.

H. E.: Kate, you are probably the only woman on the planet who would apologize to a complete stranger for not fucking him.

Kate: That's because you're not a stranger to me, Mr. Elf. You're not even creepy anymore. I still hope you're older than twelve, but even if you aren't—you've left me better than you found me, and I'm grateful for that.

H. E.: Will you open my last present?

Kate: I know it's silly, but I don't want to. It's a temptation I have to refuse. I want to give Brock a real chance, and I can't do that if I'm with you.

H. E.: So, this is good-bye.

Kate: It is.

H. E.: Kate, don't ever be ashamed of wanting sex to be exciting. And don't ever settle for less than what you need. Any man who doesn't want you the way you are doesn't deserve to be with you.

Kate: That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me, Mr. Elf.

H. E.: Don't tell Santa. He'll take me off the Naughty List, and I do all my best work there.

Kate: Good-bye, Mr. Elf.

H. E.: Good-bye, Kate.



Brock

I CONSIDERED TOSsing the prepaid phone into the trash. Instead, I stuffed it into the far corner of my home office desk drawer and locked it. I stood up and paced my apartment impatiently.

I had plans to see Kate that afternoon, but I was pretty sure waiting until then would keep my blood pressure so high I'd burst something. What a way to go. The doctors would call it the most extreme case of blue balls they'd ever seen—the one that negated the myth that men couldn't die from it.

Kate thinks I'm too good of a guy to be good in bed?

Fuck me.

I can't offer to prove her wrong. I can't tell her I know that I know what she wants.

If I run over there now and rip off her clothes she'll suspect I'm Mr. Elf.

Won't she?

Would that be such a bad thing? She wants him, and she wants me. Well, I'm him. So, you're lucky Kate, you get to fuck both of us.

She wouldn't see it that way. No, she'd fucking kill me for lying to her.

Then she'd break up with me.

Who am I kidding? She hasn't technically said she's dating me yet.

I'm such a fucking idiot. I've been doing everything I can to keep my hands off her and now she thinks I'll suck in bed.

Dammit.

I just have to wait until she gives me a sign.

Any fucking sign.

If she looks at me while breathing, I'm taking that as a request to jump her.

And I'd better be good.

I turned on my laptop and read an article about how to prolong the female orgasm. I followed up with how to give a woman multiple orgasms. Through my search I came across an article about improving sex through hypnosis.

I read it, then chastised myself. *I am such a fucking pig. Hypnotizing Kate would be wrong. Unless she wanted me to, and then it could be fun.*

Stop.

This is how I got into this situation in the first place.

I waved a finger at my half-cocked dick. “Not all of your ideas are good ones. Let me take the lead on this one.”

She thinks I'm not kinky enough for her?

She has no idea.

And I'll show her.

Just as soon as she gives me the slightest hint that I should.

Or looks me in the eye.

Really, it won't take much.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I Can Be Both

Kate

I WAITED FOR Brock to arrive for our date. I thought about what Mr. Elf had said. Could I have everything I was looking for in one man—just by telling him what I wanted?

I wrote a list of what was important to me, things I wanted to try, both alone and with Brock. Once I started, the list poured out of me. I read it over and blushed, but I wasn't as embarrassed as I thought I would be. Mr. Elf was right. If Brock didn't want the same things I did, that didn't make what I wanted wrong. I stuffed it in my purse as a reminder to be brave and express my needs.

When I met Brock at the door, we both froze in place, awkwardly staring at each other. It was as if he knew what I'd spent the afternoon thinking about. But there was no way he could.

I asked him to come inside while I gathered my purse and coat. The hungry way he watched me reminded me of the night he'd first kissed me. I hadn't seen that look in his eyes since. It gave me courage.

"I booked a table at Giulio's," he said.

"That was my favorite restaurant when I lived here before."

"I know." He took my coat and held it for me while I slipped it on. I might have imagined it, but I felt Brock inhale deeply beside my neck as if he was breathing in my scent.

"You are constantly surprising me in the most amazing ways," I said. I was used to men trying to impress me by

talking about themselves or feeding me lines, but even my ex-husband had never paid attention to what I liked the way Brock did. Caring about my happiness was the biggest compliment a man could give a woman. Brock did it naturally, without making a big deal out of it. I could see why so many people loved him; I was already falling for him myself.

He turned me around and looked deeply into my eyes. “You look like you want to say something, Kate.”

“I’m not actually hungry,” I whispered.

“Thank God,” Brock said just as softly.

He bent down and was about to kiss me, but I stopped him with a hand on his chest. He raised his head in surprise, looking wildly aroused and confused at the same time. “What’s wrong?”

Even though I wanted to kiss him almost more than I wanted to breathe, I had been rehearsing what I wanted to say to him, and I didn’t want to rush forward without saying it. I didn’t want this to be another relationship that happened *to* me and left me feeling I was only along for the ride. If Brock and I were going to take our relationship to the next level, I wanted to play a part in deciding what it would look like. “Can we talk first?”

He took my hand and placed it on the long length of his bulging cock. Even through his pants I could feel it jump at my touch. “I can attempt a conversation, but most of my blood is presently here. I can’t guarantee I’ll answer in full sentences.”

Not able to stop myself, I caressed his cock, loving how it grew even wider and fuller. “You’re so big. I’ve only really been with my husband, and he was nothing like this.”

Brock groaned. “I would tell you I don’t want to hear about your ex, but if you keep stroking me like that you can talk about whatever the fuck you want.”

I experimented with rubbing him and watched his expression. Pleasing my ex had been something I’d felt I had

to do, and I'd told myself I enjoyed it, but it hadn't ever made me wet like touching Brock was doing right now. Knowing that Brock was holding himself back, despite wanting me as badly as he obviously did, all because I'd asked him to, made me want to drive him out of his mind.

I wanted to see him lose control and take what he wanted.

I stepped back and dropped my coat to the floor. "I have a secret," I whispered.

Brock looked like he'd stopped breathing as he waited for me to share it.

I stepped out of my shoes and kicked them aside. "I want two men."

Brock paled.

With what I hoped were sexy moves, I slowly unbuttoned my shirt and dropped it, along with my bra, onto the floor. I undid my pants and slid them, along with my underwear, down my legs. "I want a nice man during the day." I put a finger in my mouth, then drew a wet trail down across one breast, over my stomach, and to my wet slit. While he watched, I dipped it inside of me and grazed the sensitive tip of my clit. "But at night I want to fuck a man who knows what he wants and knows how to make a woman give it to him."

Brock's nose flared and he said, "I can be both of those men."

I walked over, proudly naked before him, and slipped my finger, which was still wet from my own juices, into his mouth. "Then consider this your interview for the position."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Whatever You Want

Brock

*F*UCK YES.

I roughly hauled her to me. I already knew what she liked. I'd been preparing for this moment my whole life. This might be my only chance to win her over, and I was willing to do whatever it took, for as long as it took, to convince her we belonged together.

I dug my hand into her hair and held her face before mine. I had to be careful not to give away how much I already knew about her. "We have all night, Kate. There won't be an inch of you I won't lick, until you're crying out to have my cock in you. But you made me wait a long time, and now that I know you don't want to fuck a nice guy, I know exactly how I want to start." I hovered my lips over hers. "You want me to kiss you, don't you? That would be too easy, wouldn't it?"

Kate licked her lips, and she caressed the bulge in my pants again.

I unzipped the front of my pants, releasing my cock. I took her hands in mine and said, "Kneel, Kate."

She dropped to her knees and I almost came just looking at her, knowing she was eager to take instruction. "Tell me what you want, Kate."

She moved a hand as if she was going to reach for me, but I held her hands captive in mine. "Say it."

"I want your cock in my mouth." She stared at my erection hungrily.

"Look at me, Kate."

Kate looked up at me, her eyes wild and aroused.

I'd played this game with her before and taken it too far. I never wanted that to happen again. "I only want to take what you want to give. If I ask you for something and you don't like it, I want you to tell me. And I don't want you to do it. We are partners in this. You and me. That's the only way I'll do this. Do you understand? Maybe we need a safe word. Something you say when you want to stop."

"How about 'stop'?"

Despite the fact that I was near insane with desire to be in her mouth, I chuckled. "We could keep it that easy, but from what I've read it's more fun if you don't use that word."

Kate looked confused, "More fun? Oh, okay. How about—I'm serious. Knock it off."

I smirked. "We'll figure it out. For now, just shut up and fuck me with your mouth, Kate."

Kate teased my tip by circling it with her tongue. "I love it when you get impatient."

I let go of her hands and reached down, closing two fists around her hair. I was done talking. I guided her mouth onto me and shuddered with pleasure from the wet heat of it. Her tongue stroked my length as she took me deeper. She reached beneath me, cupping my balls, and alternated deep sucking with licks of her tongue. Her other hand slid down the back of my pants and gripped my ass.

On her knees, she could have asked me for anything, and I wouldn't have been able to deny her. Her submission gave her more control over me than any other woman had ever had, or ever would again. And I wouldn't mind telling her that, if I were ever able to speak again.

I was completely, irreversibly hers.

At the first twinge of an orgasm, I fought to hold out, but I'd waited so long I couldn't contain it. "I'm going to come," I

said, “and you will take it all in.” It was a command, but one that requested permission.

She nodded, and I closed my eyes and exploded down her throat. She continued sucking on me until I eased her head back. “Fuck, that was good.” She sat back on her heels, waiting for me with an almost uncertain expression on her face. I gave her my hand and helped her up.

Hugging her to my chest, I whispered in her ear, “Now you, Kate. Tell me what you want. And I’ll do it. Whatever it is.”

“We can take turns?” she asked so innocently I remembered how little experience she actually had.

I kissed her lips gently and said, “There are no rules, Kate, except the ones we make ourselves. Do you want a turn?”

Her eyes widened with excitement. “You’ll really do anything?”

I thought about it for a minute, then grinned. “I guess we’ll find out, won’t we? We all have limits, Kate. Let’s explore them together.”

A wide smile spread across her face. “Then I want you to kiss me everywhere and make me come again and again until I say I can’t possibly come one more time. Then I want a good old-fashioned, up-against-the-wall fucking. How does that sound?”

I think I’m in love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

You Like That, Don't You?

Kate

BROCK QUICKLY UNDRESSED and easily lifted me off the floor as I shuddered with pleasure. I wrapped my legs around his bare waist and felt the tip of his cock graze my sex. As I clung to him, my hands closed over his bulging biceps. He wasn't the type to flaunt what he had, but what he had was oh, so good.

As he kissed my neck, I ran my hands hungrily over him. I couldn't get enough of him. His muscular shoulders, rock-hard chest, and rippled abs. I ran a hand down between them, loving how ragged his breathing became beneath my touch.

His hands cupped my ass, posing me above his cock. He slowly lowered me down onto him, filling me, then withdrew and stroked my wet clit with his tip. "I want to lose myself in you right now, but I have a better idea."

He carried me to the kitchen and laid me down on the rectangular breakfast table. I felt exposed and excited when he stepped away, but he was back in a heartbeat with one of my large linen napkins. He folded it and blindfolded me. Then he whispered in my ear, "I'm going to give you just what you asked for, Kate. I'm going to enjoy every inch of you. Slowly. As much as we can both bear. Then, and only then, I'll give you that wall fuck."

I reached for him, but he took both my hands in one of his and tied them together above my head with another napkin. I could have gotten loose if I wanted to. *But who the hell wants to?*

The blindfold heightened my other senses, and I was intensely aware of each place his breath caressed. I felt him

standing to one side of the table. His lips followed where his breath tickled, and I was soon writhing with anticipation. He took his time with my neck, my collarbone, then kissed his way down my arm. I wanted his mouth on my breast, but he only gave it a grazing lick before moving down my other arm. By the time he gave my stomach a light kiss, I was moaning audibly.

“What do you want, Kate?” he asked. For just a second he reminded me of someone else, but when his lips settled around one of my nipples, all thoughts were driven away. His tongue flicked and circled. His teeth lightly nipped and tugged. When he rolled my other nipple between his thumb and fingers, I brought my hands up and around his neck.

He raised his head and said, “You like that, don’t you?”

“Oh, God, yes,” I rasped.

His left hand ran down my stomach and closed over my sex. He squeezed it possessively. “You’re so beautiful, Kate, laid out like this for me to feast on. I don’t want to rush. Don’t touch me. Let me touch you. I want to watch you come for me again and again.”

He leisurely stroked one finger back and forth between my lower lips. “You’re so wet already. So eager to have me inside you. But not yet. Not yet.”

He slid one finger inside me, then a second. As his mouth returned to suckle and tease my nipple, his left hand pumped in and out of me. His right hand kneaded my other breast, then alternated with his mouth until I was drowning beneath the overwhelming sensations flooding through me.

As his fingers worked in and out, he caressed my clit with his thumb. He thrust his fingers deeper and deeper until he found the spot that made me gasp. Fire shot through me, and I whimpered with pleasure. He began to increase his speed, connecting each of his thrusts with my most sensitive spot until I was weeping with pleasure and coming in an explosion of heat.

And still he didn't stop. He kissed his way down my stomach as he walked to the end of the table to stand between my legs. I heard him draw up a chair to sit. He pulled me toward him, draping my legs over his shoulders and lifting my ass off the table with his hands.

He lapped at me. "God, you taste divine." He ran his tongue intimately from my ass to my clit and back, worshipping each section as he went. I felt him tugging me toward a second, even more powerful orgasm each time his tongue thrust inside me.

He pulled back, spread my lower lips wider, and blew gently on my exposed clit. Then he suckled it with a force that had me gripping my legs around his neck as pleasure shook through me.

This time when his fingers thrust into me, I came instantly, powerfully. I thrashed back and forth on the table, unable to reach him as I soared once again beneath his touch.

Slowly coming down from my second orgasm, I heard a condom wrapper tear open. I quivered with anticipation.

He took my still-tied hands and pulled me to a seated position, then lifted me once again so my legs wrapped around his waist. He took a few steps forward until I felt the cold, hard wall behind me. One of his hands held both of mine above my head while the other cupped my ass and held me easily against the wall.

He plundered my mouth with his. Our tastes mixed together, and I met him eagerly. I couldn't get enough of him. He was all around me, filling my senses and driving me out of my mind with desire.

Gentleness fell away as his need for me overtook him. He thrust upward, filling me completely. This was no tease. He fucked my mouth with his tongue while he drove deeper and deeper into me. I opened my mouth and legs wider for him, welcoming his claiming. My tied hands looped behind his

head as he pounded even deeper into me. Faster and deeper until I was calling out his name, and he was swearing.

I came again, expecting him to join me, but he didn't. He untied my hands and lowered me to the floor. I could barely stand, swaying before him helplessly, wantonly his for wherever or however he wanted.

He turned me around so I faced the wall and lifted me again. Bending my legs, he held me under my knees while I steadied my hands against the wall. He entered with one powerful thrust from behind. His breath was hot and ragged on my neck as he drove himself in. This was a primal fucking like none I'd ever experienced. He took me with a power and command that had tears of pleasure running down my cheeks. Everything I thought I'd known about sex was blown away by the intensity of our mating.

He came with one final thrust, and I would have collapsed at his feet if he hadn't continued to hold me. He lowered me slowly to the floor, then removed the blindfold. I turned in his arms and met his eyes.

He pulled me against his chest and softly kissed my upturned mouth. "Is that what you were looking for?"

If I could have spoken then, I would have said yes. Instead, I just nodded and smiled.

Holy fucking Christmas, that was good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mine

Kate

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke in the heavenly warmth of Brock's embrace. Nothing in my life—or imagination—had prepared me for the amount of pleasure Brock had given. I thought Mr. Elf had been exciting, but he paled into obscurity beside the reality of being with a man who wanted to please me even more than he wanted to be pleased by me.

The idea that I could have everything I wanted in one man was almost too good to believe. There had to be a hitch. I ran my fingers absently over his lips.

He caught my hand and kissed it. “Why are you awake?”

“I'm just thinking about you.”

“The nice me, or the me who gave you four orgasms last night?”

“Both.” I kissed his chest. “Last night was amazing. It was like you knew exactly what I wanted.”

He tensed beside me. “You were pretty clear with your requests.”

Absently tracing my hand over his jaw, I couldn't help feeling like there was something I was missing. “It didn't feel like our first time. I don't have a lot to compare it to, but is it always like that for you?”

He put his hand on mine and brought it back to his mouth. “It never has been, and I can't imagine it ever could be with anyone else.” He kissed each of my fingers gently, slowly.

I smiled. “We're good together.”

“Kate, we’re fucking amazing together.”

I hugged his chest and loved how his arms wrapped around me, holding me close. “What do we do now?”

“Besides more of last night?”

I slapped his chest playfully. “Yes, besides that.”

“I don’t care as long as we do it together. I don’t want to sleep without you by my side. I don’t care how much shit you have to bring to my place, or I have to take to your place to make that happen.”

“You’re pushier than I thought.”

“Only when it comes to getting what I want. And I want you, Kate.”

I smiled and rested on his chest again. “I want you too, Brock. And I don’t want to sleep without you by my side, either. I guess we’ll just have to figure everything else out as we go.”

Brock tensed beneath me again. “I’m not a perfect man, Kate. I make mistakes. I’m sure there will come a time when I’ll do something to piss you off. But I want to be with you more than I’ve ever wanted to be with anyone. If I ever do disappoint you, promise me you’ll stick around so we can work it out.”

I studied his expression. “Is there something you’re not telling me?” He kissed me deeply and, as passion stirred within me, I nearly forgot what I’d asked him.

“Yes, I have plans for you today. I noticed you don’t have a Christmas tree. Let’s decorate your house, Kate. Let’s decorate mine. You and me. Naked and hanging festive shit everywhere. Let’s make this the best fucking Christmas either of us have ever had.”

No longer dreading the coming holiday, I chuckled. “That’s how you want to spend our day?”

He ran his hand down my back and laid it possessively on my bare ass. “Yes, because I know where you’ll be tonight. With me. You’re mine, Kate.”

I met his eyes and slid a hand down to stroke his quickly hardening shaft. “Well, if you’re sure you don’t want to stay in . . .”

He rolled over so he was on top of me and eased himself between my legs. He slipped his tip between my lower lips and rubbed it up and down my clit. “It probably doesn’t take that long to decorate. We can do it later.”

“Can I go first today?”

He leaned down and growled in my ear, “Whatever you want, Kate. However you want it.”

In my head, I sent out a quick apology:

Dear Santa,

I would like to formally apologize for my previous letter. I will never doubt you again.

Happily enjoying my early Christmas present,

~~Untouchable~~ Kate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Everything I'd Wished For

Kate

CHRISTMAS EVE I was seated in the living room of Brock's parents sipping on my second or possibly my third spiked eggnog. I'd been incredibly nervous about sharing the holiday with Brock's family so early on, but they'd been so excited to see me I'd begun to relax.

Or it was the brandy in the eggnog.

Either way, I was feeling better about being there. When Brock stepped away to help his mother with something in the kitchen, his sister plopped down on the couch beside me. "I'm sure you already know this, but we're all glad you're here. You're really good for Brock."

I clasped my hands on my lap and winced in anticipation of whatever backhanded comment she might add to that, but she simply continued to smile kindly at me. "Thank you."

She wrinkled her nose. "We don't always give the best first impression. My father might sometimes seem reserved around you, but he does like you . . . now that he knows you. Usually, my father is more open-minded, but something your mother said to him offended him and he never really got over it."

My eyes widened. "My mother?"

Linda's expression turned pained. "I'm not saying anything against your mother. She was probably the nicest woman. My father can be sensitive when it comes to some things. They had words once, after he worked on your house. She said something about us not being the kind of people she wanted you to spend time with."

“I’m sorry.” My chest tightened. I wanted to deny that my mother would ever have said such a thing, but I couldn’t. She’d said something similar to me many times. *She definitely said it.* “The older I get, the more I understand that my mother believed her job was to give me a better life than she’d had. She’d known poverty, fear, and what it was like to be trapped in bad relationships. She wanted to shelter me from that. She thought she could by molding me into someone who’d fit into a world she assumed was kinder.”

Linda’s lips pursed. “I used to think you thought you were too good for us.”

I blinked back tears and looked away. “All I wanted was to be part of this town, to have friends and to . . . fit in.”

She touched my arm. “I’d love to be your friend, Kate. Seriously. No matter what happens between you and Brock. I was wrong and I’d like to help you show people that they were too.”

After quickly glancing down to where her hand remained on my arm, I met her gaze. “I’d like that.”

Brock claimed the nearest chair on my other side. “You two look like you’re getting along.”

Linda rolled her eyes skyward. “Why do you always make such a big deal out of me being nice?”

Brock laughed and crossed his legs at the ankle. “Because I grew up with you?”

Linda didn’t look at all upset by his response. The two of them certainly teased each other, but there was also a mutual respect that I loved to see. “It could be the eggnog, but I’m really starting to like your family.”

Brock and Linda exchanged a look then both laughed. “Definitely the eggnog,” Brock joked.

“Definitely,” Linda added with a huge smile. “Dad says it’s the only way he can handle Aunt Stella being here.”

Brock's aunt perked up at the mention of her name and headed over to us. "It's so good to see you with someone with class, Brock," she said. "It was exhausting pretending I enjoyed talking to women with larger breasts than my ass-cheeks."

I turned to Brock. "That's your usual type?"

He rubbed a hand over his forehead. "My aunt exaggerates."

Sitting down next to Linda, his aunt added, "Linda, do you remember the Christmas he brought home the woman we were sure was a stripper? I tried to find out if he'd hired her for the night by offering her double her price if she left."

"She was not happy," Linda said with a nod.

Laughter gurgled in my throat. "What did she say?"

"Is that why she left?" Brock asked, his eyebrows arching.

"She claimed she wasn't a prostitute," Stella said with a shrug. "But she took the money I offered, so what does that say?"

Brock groaned. "She didn't."

Linda met my gaze. "I'm pretty sure she did."

Brock looked so uncomfortable I felt a little sorry for him, but not enough to hold back my questions. "Who was this woman, Brock, and how did you meet her?"

He threw up a hand. "I don't know. I was at a bar. She came over to talk to me. We talked. Had a few drinks." He frowned. "No money was exchanged."

Stella slapped a hand on her thigh and cackled. "That you felt you needed to add the last part tells us everything we need to know." She brought her hands out in front of her chest as if encircling enormous breasts. "Honestly, I had to ask her to leave because I wanted to know what it would be like to motorboat breasts that are that big."

Brock's father walked up, heard the tail end of what Stella had said, turned on his heel and walked away again. Brock and Linda burst out laughing. Taking my hand in his, Brock said, "Aunt Stella, are you trying to kill my father?"

She cackled again. "Since the day he married my sister. She had the sweetest boyfriend before him who also knew how to fix cars. I could have had free oil changes for life. But no, she needed to think about herself and her own happiness."

"You could have married a mechanic," Linda said in a light tone.

"Sure, but then I wouldn't have three houses and the staff to keep them clean." Her expression softened. "I miss Aaron. He couldn't fix a damn thing, but I loved him. Christmas isn't the same without him, no matter how many houses I have."

Linda put her arm around her aunt. "We miss him too."

Brock's mother came over and wagged a finger at her sister. "You promised you'd be on your best behavior this year."

Stella leaned toward me and mumbled, "Not a mechanic *and* a ratfink."

I tried to keep a straight face, but it was a struggle.

Brock's mother folded her arms across her chest. "Stella, I love you and it's Christmas, so you get to stay. However, I also love my not a mechanic ratfink. So, unless you want to be washing all the dishes on your own, could you try to not deliberately annoy Marty?"

"Fine," Stella said with a wave of her hand. "However, for the record, I was not trying to embarrass Marty. I was teasing Brock about the prostitute he brought to Christmas a few years ago."

Brock's mother brought a hand up to cover her eyes, but she laughed a little as she did. When she lowered her hand, her eyes met mine. "Kate, this is us on our best behavior."

“She *wasn't* a prostitute,” Brock said so earnestly I couldn't not laugh.

“It's okay.” I leaned over and gave his leg a pat. “I'm sure she was a very nice woman.”

Linda chimed in, “Who took Stella's money and ran?”

Brock's mother's mouth dropped open. “Stella, you paid Brock's date?”

“Not this one,” Stella pointed at me then winked.

From the other side of the room, Brock's father called out, “What do you say we open a present now?” He walked over with a pile of gifts in his arms and placed them in front of me. “Kate, choose which one you'd like to open tonight. Then, tomorrow morning, after breakfast, you can open the rest with us.”

The room stilled and my breath caught in my throat. “Tomorrow morning?”

Brock laced his fingers through mine. “We celebrate both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day together. After breakfast, Dad's side comes over and things get a little chaotic. The house will fill with about thirty people and someone always has a suggestion on how to exchange gifts better. It's always nuts. Don't feel pressured to come to both if you aren't ready for that much family time.”

Family time. For the first part of my life Christmas had been just me and my mother. Wayne's idea of Christmas was dinner with other couples then Christmas Day lying to his parents about why we had to keep our visit with them brief. I wanted to experience a Christmas where people wanted to be together. “It sounds wonderful. As long as it's okay that I'm here.”

Brock raised my hand to his lips and gave the tips of my fingers a kiss. “It's more than okay.” Then he nodded toward the pile of gifts at my feet. “Pick a present.”

“Before I do. . .” I hesitated. “I brought something for your family as well. It’s not much.” I reached into my purse, pulled out a rectangular box and handed it to his mother. “I hope you like it.”

Marty stepped closer to her as she opened it. She was beaming when she looked at the photo of their home that I’d had framed. “It’s our house the way it was when Brock was little. Do you remember the rose bush we had back then? I was just thinking about how I miss it and now I have it again.” She smiled at me. “Thank you, Kate.”

My face warmed. “I found the photo in my mother’s things and thought you’d like it.”

“That confirms it,” Stella announced, “she’s a keeper.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Brock murmured.

I reached down to choose a present, but in that moment, wrapped in the warmth and acceptance of his family, I already had everything I’d wished for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Did I Just Say That?

Brock

WEEKS LATER, I stood next to Tyler Cage, my architect, and zoned out while Tyler pointed out tiny changes he'd made to our proposed plans for our next mill renovation site. "So, you'll notice I'm now suggesting leveling the building instead of renovating it."

Tyler and I had worked together on several contracts, and had been friends for as long as I could remember. Throughout high school and college we had been each other's wingmen. I looked down at the plans spread across my desk. "Sorry, I'm distracted today."

"Obviously."

I grinned but said nothing.

Tyler asked, "What do you think of what I did on the second floor? It'll mean a few less units, but the area I created could be three stories high. My suggestion is to use it for a multifloored gym like we did in Barrington. I can design a pool off to the side on the first floor. We can also add a walking track on the perimeter of each floor."

Falling naturally back into business mode, I looked over the plan with a critical eye and discussed each of Tyler's suggested changes and estimated the cost each would present to potential profit ratio. Some of the architect's creative additions stayed, some were cut after a heated debate, and some were put off, pending more information on the price of the materials needed. I was still smiling as we summed up how to move forward.

Shaking his head in disgust, Tyler said, “Would you please be miserable again? You’re already responsible for two of my relationships ending prematurely. They both wanted me to look as fucking happy as you do. I told the first one that sex has to be phenomenal to make a man as lovesick as you are right now. That did not go over well. The second one kept trying to sleep over at my house. It got awkward. Especially in that snowstorm. She really wanted to stay, but she made it home fine.”

“So it’s my fault you’re an asshole?”

“No, but stop making me look bad.”

“I can’t believe you sent a woman home in a snowstorm.”

“I can’t believe you let one practically move in with you.”

“Kate’s different.”

“Chris said that about Kim, and look what happened there.”

“They got married.”

“Exactly. You’re my last single friend. Do you know the kind of intense pressure I’ll be under once you cave?”

“I didn’t say I was getting married. I said Kate isn’t like the women I’ve dated in the past. I’m different when I’m with her. She makes me happy.”

Tyler threw his hands up in the air. “Fuck. Can you hear yourself? I’ll have to find a whole new circle of friends, or every woman I date will be picking out a wedding dress.”

I shook my head. “Tell them your snowstorm story. That should ease their enthusiasm a bit.”

Tyler closed his laptop. “You’d think that, but they love to try to reform me. The more of an ass I am, the more they want me. Remember the twin I dated? Summer something. I don’t even remember why we broke up.”

I sat in my office chair, leaning back as I did. “Didn’t you tell her you wanted to screw her sister?”

Tyler rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “No, I said it was weird to be dating one when I found both equally attractive.”

“That’s not much better.”

“Well, anyway, the other one, Skylar, hooked up with me last night at Mick’s. At least I think it was Skylar. I was buzzed.”

“You’re an idiot. A talented architect, but an idiot.”

Tyler shrugged, then asked, “Will you be around for the game on Sunday?”

“I don’t think so. Kate and I rented a place on the ocean in Narragansett. It’ll be cold, but the house is beautiful, with incredible fireplaces in every room. We have it for the whole weekend.”

Tyler buttoned his winter coat. “You’ve got it really bad for this one, Brock. Maybe you *should* marry her. I’m picturing you if she dumps you, and it’s not pretty.”

“Bye, Tyler.”

Tyler paused at the door of the office trailer and said, “I’ll update the plans and send them over to you tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

“Hey, can you think of a smooth way to ask Skylar if she was the one I was with last night? Sometimes I’m too blunt.”

“I’m not getting involved in this one.”

Tyler frowned. “Don’t go getting all high and mighty just because you’ve finally dated a woman for longer than a week. You may have her fooled, but I know you’ve done just as much stupid shit as I have.”

I neither agreed with nor denied that claim. Long after Tyler had left, I was still thinking about what my friend had said. *I have done stupid shit. Before Kate and with Kate. I’m just lucky Kate doesn’t know it.*

I opened the drawer to my office desk, took out the prepaid phone I'd told myself to get rid of at least a hundred times, and checked to see if there was a new message on it. As always, I was filled with relief when there was none. It meant Kate still didn't regret her decision.

Looking at the phone gave me the urge to confess everything. However, much like how there was no smooth way to ask a woman if you'd slept with her or her twin sister the night before, there was also no good way to tell Kate I had lied to her. *Kate, you remember that letter you wrote Santa Claus requesting a good old-fashioned, up-against-the-wall, down-and-dirty fucking? Yes, that one. Well, I'm the one who found it. I was Mr. Elf.*

No, things were going too well with Kate to fuck it up with the truth.

Realizing I sounded more like Tyler than I wanted to admit, I threw the phone back into the drawer and locked it.

Regardless of how our relationship had started, Kate and I were happy together. *That's what matters.*



“DO NOT LEAVE me like this,” I said. Kate walked away from the bed she'd cuffed me to, naked. What had sounded like an exciting idea when she'd suggested it had moved beyond my comfort zone when I'd tested the handcuffs and realized they could actually hold me.

“I'm not going anywhere,” Kate said as she walked back toward me with a blindfold in her hands.

“You didn't say anything about a blindfold.”

“And you said it was my turn to be in charge. So zip it, or I'll watch a movie instead of making your fantasy of having me and another woman come true.”

Already aroused and impatient to see what she had planned, I quieted obediently.

She placed the blindfold over my eyes and kissed me deeply. My sense of sight removed, I noticed my other senses were suddenly heightened. I felt her hair brush across my bare chest and shuddered from the pleasure of it. Each place my body touched hers burned with excitement. Her tongue played with mine, darting in and withdrawing, knowing I couldn't stop her. I was both frustrated and increasingly turned on by this flip in power.

She ran a hand down my chest and caressed my cock. I thrust upward involuntarily in response. Her hand worked me expertly until I was spiraling upward toward a crest I didn't want to reach yet. She broke off mid-kiss and said, "Did you hear the door? That must be my friend."

I groaned in a combination of pleasure and frustration when she walked away from me briefly. When she returned, I only heard one set of footsteps, but I could smell the perfume of another woman. "You're killing me, Kate. Take off this blindfold."

"I can't," Kate whispered near my ear. "My friend is shy. She doesn't want you to know who she is so you can't see her, and she won't speak. But she says she loves to suck cock."

I couldn't tell if Kate actually had someone with her or not, but I stopped caring as soon as a mouth—I assumed Kate's—closed over my cock. She took me deeply, sucking gently. She paused and said, "She says I'm wearing too many clothes, and so is she. I'm taking off her shirt. Now her bra. She has the most beautiful tits, Brock. Small, perfect. I hope you don't mind waiting while I lick them. Oh, they are so nice. So firm. She wants to see mine. We can't stop there. We're both naked now. You need to feel her tits, Brock. Feel how amazing they are. They're still wet from my tongue."

A moment later I felt a pair of breasts rubbing against my chest. I was about to question why I didn't also feel the rest of the woman's body against me, but Kate's mouth closed over my cock again, and I gave myself over to the fantasy. Kate pumped her head up and down, periodically stopping to say

something to the other woman in the room. I couldn't tell what she was talking about, nor did I care. I lived for each time her mouth returned to suck me again. Her pauses were mind-muddling, orgasm-postponing torture, but I wasn't complaining.

“She says we should switch now,” Kate whispered against my lips. “She wants you in her mouth. How perfect. Now you can have me while she has you.”

Kate straddled my head and positioned herself so her sex was within reach of my mouth. I lapped at her, drinking her in while I felt another mouth close over my cock. “Do you like that?” Kate asked. “If you do, show me. Fuck me with your tongue while she sucks you.”

I did. The mouth on me moved up and down slowly. I knew the mouth on my cock wasn't real, but it didn't matter. Kate wiggled back and forth above me, guiding me to her pleasure, and soon I was out of my mind with desire for her. I stroked her, sucked her, teased her with fast-paced tongue flicks, until she came with a cry.

After her climax, Kate climbed off of me and said, “Looks like my friend has to leave. It'll just be me again.”

I felt her sheath me in a condom, then straddle my waist. She lowered herself on top of me, and I thrust up into her. I couldn't see her. I couldn't touch her. All I could do was feel her as she raised and lowered herself onto me again and again until I was wild with the need to finish.

But she wouldn't let me. She stopped and gave instructions on what she wanted me to do, or she simply ran her hands up and down my body.

Finally, when I could take no more, she released my hands from the cuffs, and I whipped off the blindfold. I rolled her beneath me, raised her legs up, and pounded into her, loving that she was as crazed as I was when I took us both to a white-hot release.

Afterward, I tucked her against my side beneath the blankets and chuckled. “What the hell did you use on me? Was it a doll? I couldn’t figure it out.”

She smiled and kissed my lips gently. “Some things are better kept secret. Just don’t look under your bed unless you want to ruin the mystery.” She ran a hand playfully across my chest. “Was it as good as your fantasy?”

I smoothed her hair with one hand and answered honestly, “Better. We don’t have to avoid her at the supermarket.”

Kate chuckled as she raised herself up onto one elbow to look down into my eyes. “I never knew it could be like this, Brock. I feel free. I can be myself with you.”

“And apparently other women too.”

Kate nodded. “I could never have done that with my ex-husband. I would have worried he would laugh at me. It’s different with you. I trust you.”

Trust. Shit. I really need to get rid of that phone. “I’m not perfect, Kate, but I do love you.”

Kate froze.

I froze.

Fuck.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Still a Temptation

Kate

I COULDN'T BREATHE. I couldn't think. I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out. As the silence dragged on it became painfully awkward.

I sat up, hugging the blanket. *Brock loves me? Oh, my God, Brock loves me. Why can't I say it back? What the hell is wrong with me? He's everything I ever wanted in a man.*

"Kate?"

I closed my eyes. "I think you should go home."

He rubbed my bare back reassuringly as he said, "Don't shut me out, Kate. Talk to me."

I shook my head. I didn't want to talk because I didn't know how to put into words how I was feeling: a mixture of happy, terrified, and angry. Happy that a man I had feelings for loved me. Terrified to consider getting serious with any man so soon after my divorce. And angry we couldn't continue on blissfully as we were.

He'd said he loved me.

It was out there.

Three little words had changed everything. Fighting back real panic, I said, "Just go, Brock. Please. Go home."

"I would," he said dryly, "but we're at my place."

I half laughed, half sobbed, and started to edge off the bed. "I forgot. Sorry. I'll go."

He sat up and grabbed my arm. “No. It’s late. You’re not driving home upset.”

“I can’t stay here.”

“Why? Because I said I love you? I take it back.”

Beneath a heavy fog of confusion, I argued the point automatically. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“Well, it sure as hell doesn’t work the way you think it does. Where are you going, Kate? And why?”

Eyes filling with tears, I said, “I need to think, Brock. Everything between us has happened so fast. My head is spinning. I can’t handle this.”

“So, you’re okay with sleeping with me as long as I don’t care about you?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. See why I need to leave? Oh, my God, you must hate me right now.”

Brock turned me to face him. “I could never hate you.”

I chewed my bottom lip nervously. “But you do love me?”

Brock raised one shoulder and gave me a boyishly charming smile. “I always have.” He pulled me to him and hugged me to his chest. “Don’t run away, Kate. I shouldn’t have said anything yet. I know you’re still gun-shy after your divorce.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” *You think you love me, but you don’t know me. What would you think of me if I told you about Mr. Elf? About the real reason I asked you for your number?*

“Why don’t you let me worry about what will or won’t hurt me? I enjoy being with you, and you enjoy being with me. Forget about everything else.” When I didn’t say anything, he added, “Well, don’t forget to remove the woman from under my bed. Mrs. Gleason would never look me in the eye again.”

I relaxed a little at his joke. I shook my head, imagining what his cleaning lady would say if she found the silicone

female body parts I had used to create Brock's fantasy.
"Imagine what she would think of us."

"Who knows, maybe we could inspire her to try the same with Mr. Gleason."

I smiled against Brock's bare chest.

Brock lay back down, pulling me down with him and tucking me back beneath the blankets. "Relax, Kate. Don't overthink this."

Even as I snuggled up against Brock, I couldn't help but remember another time and another man who had said very similar words to me. Brock thought my confusion stemmed from my divorce, and that was partially right, but it also came from the knowledge that I had found pleasure in two men since my husband.

Two very different men.

Although I had told Mr. Elf I was finished with him, I sometimes still wondered what it would have been like if I had met him on the twelfth day of our game, as he had planned. I felt guilty each time I thought of him. I hated that I'd kept the phone he'd given me instead of throwing it away, as I should have. But the relationship, having ended so abruptly, hadn't entirely run its course for me.

He was still an unknown.

Still a temptation.

I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep.

I am so fucked up.

So, so fucked up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Have We Crossed a Line?

Kate

“**I**S IT SAFE to come in?” I called from the doorway of my friend’s home. We were supposed to meet for a walk at 10:00 a.m., but I had gotten used to Angie operating on what she called baby time. Considering that Angie had twin boys under the age of one. I couldn’t judge. I followed the sound of screaming up the stairs into the children’s room.

Angie gave a flustered smile when she saw me in the doorway. “I’m almost ready. I had them both dressed. Then Tim decided he was going to poop so much that no diaper could contain it. I swear they can talk to each other because as soon as I had Tim cleaned up, Tom did practically the same. I know what their first words will be. All I seem to say lately is: ‘Are you fucking serious?’”

I chuckled and leaned into one of the cribs to pick up one of the crying boys. He settled down quickly and made a grab for my hair, as he often did. Small children used to make me nervous, but Angie had an open and loving relationship with hers, despite her occasional bout of profanity. I cooed at the infant in my arms. “You would never do that to Mommy, would you? He says you’re making up stories, Angie.”

“Sure, encourage him. Next he’ll tell you he slept all night.” Angie finished dressing Tom and picked him up. “So, update me on life next door. You know I’m living vicariously through you right now.”

I bounced Tim on my hip gently, hiding the blush that colored my cheeks by momentarily turning away. “My life is not that exciting.”

“It’s better than what’s happening over here. I told Mike we’re not having sex again until he gets a vasectomy. He thinks I’m joking.”

I turned back in surprise. “You’re not having sex with your husband?”

“Spoken like a single person with no children. Mike’s working crazy hours right now, to make up for the income I walked away from so I could stay home with the boys. And I am exhausted. Trust me, when these two finally do fall asleep at night, the last thing I’m thinking about is sex. You know what my idea of a perfect night with my husband is? Four hours of uninterrupted sleep.”

“I told you I would watch the boys for you. Maybe the two of you should plan a date night.”

Angie gathered up the boys’ coats and said, “Let’s change the subject. How is Brock?”

I helped the little boy she held into his winter clothing. “Good. I stayed at his place last night.”

“I bet you’re still having amazing sex, aren’t you? Sometimes, I miss those days.”

I blushed again and followed Angie down the stairs and into the garage, where we secured the boys in a double stroller. We continued our talk once we were out walking in the brisk morning air.

We started up a steep hill, side by side. With her long brown hair swaying back and forth in its ponytail, Angie said, “I know you don’t normally talk about stuff like this, but I have to know—is it as good as I remember?”

Although I now had a small circle of friends Linda had cultivated for me, I couldn’t imagine life without Angie. I was different with her—less afraid to be wrong. “It’s amazing.”

“I probably should take you up on the date-night offer, but if it ended up being disappointing, I think I would just cry. Is that my hormones? I mean, I love my husband, but I don’t feel

sexy at all. I'm a mother. I don't know if I have any desire left in me. That's not good, is it?"

"I'm sure it will come back."

"I just worry. Watching you with Brock makes me feel like I've lost a part of myself. How do I find my way back to that?"

"Have you tried toys?"

"Toys? You mean like sex toys? I don't have any of those. Do you?"

I kept my eyes focused straight ahead. "I do. My ex-husband was, let's just say . . . selfish in bed. When I was first divorced I was so angry. I wasn't sure I had ever enjoyed sex and thought I'd never want it again. I joked about wanting it, but I wasn't serious. A friend introduced me to toys. I'm not saying they're for everyone, but, if you're looking for a way to heat things up with your husband, they can be fun."

Angie stopped and gave me a long look. "You're spicier than you let on."

I gave my friend a wide, unabashed smile. "You have no idea."

Angie started walking again, and I fell into step beside her. We walked in comfortable silence for a few minutes, then Angie said, "I saw you drive by with your car packed with boxes. Does that mean you've cleaned out your mom's room?"

"Mostly, but there's still a lot to do. I'm giving myself until summer to decide what to do with the house."

"You and Brock seem pretty serious. Maybe you'll end up getting a place together."

I tripped over an uneven part of the sidewalk, then said, "Maybe. Brock told me he loved me last night."

"That's awesome! Congratulations. Not that anyone would be surprised."

"I didn't say it back."

“Oh, shit.”

“I know. It was really awful. I just froze. I thought I loved my husband, but I never felt anything close to what I feel for Brock. Brock makes me happy. Why couldn't I tell him I love him?”

“Cut yourself some slack, Kate. You haven't been divorced that long. Brock has to understand that.”

“I hope so. I'm all jumbled up inside these days. Sometimes I'm happy, then I'm angry. I'm scared to rush into something and be wrong a second time. I'm so confused.”

“Give yourself some time. Brock doesn't look like he's going anywhere.”

I nodded, feeling a hundred times better now that I'd gotten last night's worries out of my head. “Thank you, Angie. You don't know what it means to me to have someone I can talk to.”

Angie waved it off and kept her workout-paced walk going. “That's what friends are for.” After a quiet moment, she added, “So, if I were going to buy a toy, where would you suggest I start?”

After quickly blinking twice, I answered, “Not only are remote control Ben Wa balls really effective, but they also have health benefits. They strengthen your inner muscles. If you want to really go nuts, drop the boys off with me for a day, treat yourself to a long nap while your husband is at work, and keep those balls in all day, alternating an hour on, an hour off. Trust me, you'll be all over your husband when he gets home.”

Angie shot me a shy smile. “Have we crossed the line into oversharing?”

“Not unless you feel uncomfortable. You're a good friend to me, Angie. The kind of friend I always wished I'd had. I'm not embarrassed if you're not.”

Suddenly looking a whole lot happier, Angie said, “Really, what's the big deal, right? I'm already hooked up to a breast

pump every day. What's one more intimate connection with an appliance?"

I winked at Angie. "As long as you don't get the two confused."

Our eyes met, and we both burst out laughing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sorry I Said I Love You

Brock

“WHAT PUT YOU in such a bad mood this morning?” my sister, Linda, asked as she plopped a cup of steaming coffee in front of me.

“I’m in a great mood,” I snapped and stood, leaving the coffee untouched on my desk. “Everything is fucking perfect.”

Linda took off her coat and hung it on a hook beside the door. “Did we lose the Fall River job?”

“No, we won that bid.”

“Did you argue with Kate?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Linda sat down in my chair. “Okay, so you had your first blowout with Kate. Big deal. Couples fight. Especially when they spend as much time together as the two of you do.”

“We didn’t have a fight. And I’m not talking to you about this. Did you contact the tile place I asked you to?”

“Yes.”

“Are they able to deliver on the timetable we need?”

“I convinced them it’s possible.”

“Good.” I walked over to the trailer’s window. “The crew will have to work overtime if we’re going to get this project completed before the end of the month, in time to start the next one. We should still come in close to budget. And the profit we’ll make from the next job will more than make up for anything we lose by paying overtime.”

“We’ll pull it off, Brock. We always do. We’re getting a lot of press right now, and that’s moving the units, even the ones that aren’t completed yet. The bank is happy. Our investors are happy. You’re the only one who looks miserable today. Are you sure you don’t want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I fucked up.”

Linda swiveled in my chair, one hand on top of my desk. “What happened?”

I shook my head. My twin sister and I were close. But we weren’t so close that she knew how Kate and I had actually gotten together. There are some secrets a man shouldn’t tell anyone. The game I had played with Kate after I found her letter to Santa Claus was one. *A smart man takes that shit to the grave.*

“Earth to Brock. Are you still with me?” my sister asked.

“Sorry, I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Brock, do you remember when you were twelve and you wet the bed? You were mortified and didn’t want Mom and Dad to know. So you came to me, and I helped you clean it up. I never told anybody.”

“First of all, I was six. And I think I threatened your life if you ever said a word about it.”

“Are you sure? I thought you were older.”

I glared at my sister.

She waved her hand and continued, “It doesn’t matter how old you were. What matters is that I have never told anyone. You can trust me. If something is bothering you, tell me. It’s not good to keep things all bottled up.”

“It’s Kate.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.” I continued to frown. “I just said something I shouldn’t have.”

Linda's eyes widened. "Did you tell her you want to see other people? If so, you're an idiot. We all like her."

"No, it was nothing like that." I rubbed one of my temples, hating that my sister knew me so well. "I told her I love her."

"And?"

"And she told me she wasn't ready to hear that."

"Ouch."

"Tell me about it. She was gone when I woke up this morning. She left me a note saying she had errands to run. I tried to call her, but she didn't answer."

"That's not good. What are you going to do?"

I rocked back on my heels. "What can I do? Hallmark doesn't make cards that say, 'Sorry I said I love you.'"

Linda came around the desk and hugged me. "It's kind of cute seeing you like this. I'm so used to lecturing you on how not to break someone else's heart. She'll come around, Brock. Just give her time."

I hugged her back, then shooed her out of my office so I could return some business calls I'd been putting off. I felt slightly better after talking to Linda. Nothing had changed; Kate simply needed more time.

I had waited my whole life for her.

I could wait a while longer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Goodbye

Kate

I WAS BACK at Mom's house, sorting through boxes of papers my mother had stored in the attic. It was difficult to decide what to keep and what to throw away. Mom had saved some of my schoolwork from as far back as kindergarten. Before finding the stashes, I would've said she had not been a particularly sentimental woman. Yet she had kept every card I had ever given her, even the ones from when my signature had been nothing more than a scribble.

Do I just throw all of this away?

Do I keep it to show to my children someday, and leave it here so they can take one look at them and then dispose of them? I may never have children. I may not be living here six months from now. And then what will I do with all of this crap?

In the corner of the attic, tucked beneath several dusty boxes, I found a plastic bin of photos. Mom and I had moved to Rhode Island when I was young, but not so young that I couldn't remember many of the people in the pictures.

There were aunts and uncles, cousins I had almost forgotten I had. I found one picture of my parents posing with me when I was still in diapers. There were no pictures of my father after that. My memories of him were few and consisted mostly of him arguing with my mother.

Since Mom had been unwilling to speak freely of my father, and I had never pushed the issue, I knew little more about him than he had signed his name on my birth certificate.

Mom rarely spoke of him or his family, except as a cautionary tale of what she didn't want for me.

I sat back on my heels beside the bin and thought about Brock and his family. I couldn't imagine them owning a box of photos of people they never spoke to. Brock's mother was openly affectionate with her children and very close with her siblings. Brock's father had a large extended family he also kept in touch with. Watching Brock with his family, I envied their intimacy.

Brushing my hair out of my eyes, I corrected myself. *Envy* had negative connotations that didn't apply to my feelings toward Brock's family. I wanted what they had. I craved their closeness and the loyal way in which they treated one another.

Could I have all that with Brock? Could life be that good?

I remembered a college friend once handing me a crystal ball. She had asked me to look into it. The possibility that I might actually see my future had frozen me. I'd looked down at the ball helplessly, afraid I wasn't special enough to be able to see anything, and afraid I'd feel crazy if I actually did see something. So instead of opening myself up to the experiment, I'd given myself a headache. My friend had spouted some mumbo jumbo about fear blocking her psychic potential. I had laughed it off at the time. But I'd always had trouble trusting—even myself. *A working crystal ball would come in handy now.*

As I looked through the bin I found a scrapbook I'd made with Mom when we had first moved to Misty Falls and into this large Victorian home. There were pictures of me unpacking my luggage in a very pink bedroom, sitting on the front steps of the house in a beautiful lavender dress and matching shoes, and practicing piano in the living room dressed in a similar outfit, all as a young child. My heart went out to the young girl who had tried to be brave for her mother, but whose eyes looked sad and scared even in photos where she was smiling. I had forgotten how difficult that first year had been.

A few pages later, there were photos of Brock and me watching his father construct a playhouse in my backyard. I was still dressed like I'd just come from a tea party, and Brock looked like he hadn't bathed in a week. Although Brock's father had been hired to make some renovations on the main home, he had offered to build the playhouse for us as his way of saying welcome to the town. What I remembered most about Brock's father was how he had designed the miniature home exactly to my specifications. In a life that had felt out of my control, the playhouse in my backyard had been my haven—something designed by me and built just for me.

Brock's father may have built it, but he had left the job of painting and decorating it to us. I wished I had photos of the process. I remembered my babysitter being furious with me when Brock and I had engaged in a paint-flinging war. The babysitter knew my mother wouldn't have approved, so she scrubbed me clean before Mom returned from work.

There were also no photos of me in jeans, or running wild with Brock as I had most of that summer. Mom had filled the album with images of me visiting museums, playing violin at a recital, and receiving an award at school.

Anyone looking at the scrapbook would have thought I had had a perfect childhood. But I remembered being lonely—especially after that summer. When Brock's father had finished his work on our home, Brock moved on to work with him on other projects, leaving me behind.

I had often hoped that Brock would sneak over to be with me, but he never did. I had attended private schools, and my afternoons had been filled with lessons. I didn't have many friends at my school or in Misty Falls. By the time we had reached high school, Brock had been a football player never seen in public without some adoring girlfriend at his side. *And me? I was Untouchable Kate. Such a joke to the local kids that I pretended they didn't exist.*

I stopped seeing them.

Even Brock.

And stopped wishing for anything but the life my mother had planned for me. I replaced the lid on the bin of photos. Ignore what you can't face. That's what Mom believed. And I followed in her footsteps. It's what allowed me to turn a blind eye to blatant evidence that my husband was cheating on me, until it became so obvious I had no choice but to leave.

Now I'm avoiding Brock's calls because I don't know what to say. I didn't come home because I want to recapture the past. I see that now. I came here hoping I could find a way to free myself from it. How to stop being who others want me to be and find myself.

Rising slowly, I walked back downstairs. I went into the kitchen and opened the drawer where I kept the phone I had used to communicate with Mr. Elf. I hadn't opened it since telling him I had chosen Brock. I hadn't wanted to know if he'd written to me since.

As I held the prepaid phone in my hand, I thought of how I'd found it on my doorstep. I smirked at the memory of what Mr. Elf had told me to do and how much I had enjoyed doing it. While I'd been following his naughty instructions, I'd been defying the strict way in which I'd been raised. I'd done what I'd wanted without regard for whether it was right or wrong. Without worry of what others would think of me. I'd felt free during my time with Mr. Elf, until he'd begun to involve Brock too much. Good, honest Brock. *What would he think of me if he knew what I did with Mr. Elf? That our relationship started as part of a game I was playing with another man?*

Why can't I tell Brock I love him? Because I feel guilty about the way we got together? If so, I can fix that. I opened a cabinet door and held the phone over the trash can. *Goodbye, Mr. Elf. Thank you for giving me the push I needed to stop hiding in my house and worrying what everyone thought of me. Thank you for teaching me that sex can be fun, and partners are optional. I may never know who you are, but I won't keep feeling guilty about having known you. I wouldn't have Brock if it weren't for you. You're not a temptation, Mr.*

Elf; you're a confession I need to make. One I hope Brock will understand.

Once that hurdle is removed—I'll be free.

Free to tell Brock "I love you."

Because I do.

I smiled.

I do love you, Brock. There are so many things I don't know, but I know that.

I dropped the phone into the trash bin and closed the cabinet door. I put on my coat, gathered my keys, and headed out the door. I drove to Brock's office trailer at his construction site, hoping to catch him before he left for the day. As I was knocking on the door of the trailer, his sister came sprinting toward me.

"Kate."

"Linda, is he here?"

"You just missed him. Call him, he's probably not that far. He said he was heading home to shower and then over to your place."

I hesitated. On the way over, I'd tried to figure out exactly how to explain Mr. Elf to Brock, but I hadn't yet found the right words. Writing my thoughts out on paper had always helped me express myself better. If Brock was waiting for me back at my house, I needed to figure this out now, before I got back home. I needed him to understand that being with Mr. Elf had opened me up in a way that had made it possible to be with him. What kind of declaration of love involves gratitude to another man? "Linda, do you think it would be okay if I used his office for a few minutes? I just need to write something down."

"Sure." Seeing the concerned look in her eyes, I knew Brock had already talked to her. "Anything you need. He keeps everything locked up, but I have a key. There are pens inside the top drawer." Ushering me inside, Linda unlocked

Brock's desk. "Sit in his chair. I always do. I'll stay and file a few things while you write out what you need to. Just tell me when you're done, and I'll lock everything up again."

"Thank you," I said and gingerly sat in Brock's chair. It was a humble desk for a man who ran a business the size of his. That was one of the many things I admired about him: Brock didn't put on a show. He was exactly what he appeared to be.

In search of writing instruments, I opened the top drawer of his desk and took out a blank writing pad and a pen. I was just about to close the drawer when I caught a glimpse of something that looked oddly familiar. I pulled the drawer out farther.

There, among pens and pencils, was a cell phone that looked exactly like the one I had thrown in the trash earlier that day. I told myself it meant nothing. Cell phones, even simple models like the one before me, were common.

I glanced over to make sure Linda wasn't watching me. Brock's sister was busy filing papers, just as she'd said she'd be. I turned the phone on.

I felt a little crazy, and more than a little paranoid, when I opened the messages. There was no way this phone could be what I feared it was. The room around me spun as I read its last texts.

Goodbye, Mr. Elf.

Goodbye, Kate.

I tossed the phone back in the drawer and slammed it shut.

Linda called out from across the room, "Are you done already?"

Brock has Mr. Elf's phone? Why? How could he have it, unless—? Furious and still in shock, I stood and said coldly, "I'm done, all right. So done."

Without explaining myself to Linda, I walked out of the trailer and back to my car. I sent Brock a text saying I didn't

want to see him that night.

He didn't respond, which was fine because he was the last person I wanted to see. If Brock was Mr. Elf, that meant everything we had was a lie.

Nothing more than another game.



Brock

STANDING IN THE middle of my room, with only a towel wrapped around my waist, I cursed as I reread the text Kate had just sent me. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

If any of my friends had called me for advice on a problem like this one, I would have told them to give the woman space. Dating was a game of chess, where a man had to choose his next move carefully. Contacting a woman after she told you she didn't want to see you gave her all the power, and often served as a deathblow to the relationship. I'd seen my friends do it a hundred times.

Play by the rules if you want to win. At least that was what I'd believed before I fell in love with Kate. It was different with her. I didn't want to play games with her. Well, not head games. I tried to ignore my hard-on just thinking about some of the role playing we had tried together in the bedroom. *Stop that,* I chastised my traitorous dick. *This is serious.*

I paced the bedroom impatiently, wanting to give her time, but not enough time to move on to another man. *Things were a hell of a lot easier when women were chasing me.*

I gave in and called her. I couldn't play cool with this one. Her phone went straight to voice mail, and I cursed for a good five minutes before I threw my phone across the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Oh No, He Didn't

Kate

*T*HAT BASTARD.

I drove back home, flopping back and forth between wanting to hunt Brock down to tell him off and wanting to hide away from the world and cry. I thought I'd found a good guy, but turned out he was just like my ex: a lying bastard.

I told myself to take time off from men. I knew I wasn't ready. But what did I do instead? I jumped right into bed with the first guy who paid attention to me.

Instead of stopping at home, I pulled into Angie's driveway. I paused when I noticed Mike's car was in the garage, but I didn't care if I looked crazy in front of him. I needed a friend, and Angie was the only one I had.

Angie answered the front door with one of the twins straddled on her hip. She took one look at the expression on my face and called her husband to take the baby. Mike rushed over, still dressed in the charcoal dress pants and ivory shirt he'd worn to work. He was already holding one of his sons; Angie handed him the other. "Mike, I need a few minutes with Kate. Can you feed the boys? There are bottles in the fridge."

Mike nodded. "Sure. Kate, are you okay?"

I hated that my eyes were shiny with tears. "Yes, I just have to ask Angie something. It'll only take a minute."

Once we were alone and settled on the couch in the living room, I gave up trying to look brave and started to sob. Angie handed me a tissue box and wrapped an arm around my

shoulders. “What happened, Kate? I saw you this morning and everything was fine. Did someone die?”

I shook my head and blew my nose. “No.”

“Did you find something while cleaning out your mom’s stuff? I know that makes you sad, but I’ve never seen you like this.”

I sniffed and grabbed a new tissue. “It’s Brock. I caught him in a lie. A huge lie.”

“I know he’s not married. Did he cheat on you? If he did after what your husband put you through, I’ll twist off his left testicle and hand it to him.”

I sniffed and looked up. “That’s an oddly specific threat.”

“That’s because I mean it.”

Taking a deep breath, I folded another tissue in my hand. “He didn’t cheat. But he hasn’t been honest with me.”

Angie put a hand on my arm. “Is he broke?”

“No, as far as I know his company is doing really well.”

“Is he dying?”

Wiping away a tear with a tissue, I said, “I wouldn’t be angry with him if he were.”

Angie slapped her hand on her thigh. “He has kids he never told you about. If Mike knew about them and didn’t tell me, I’ll kill him.”

I smiled reluctantly. “No. No kids. Well, none that I know of. That’s my point. If you catch someone in a large lie, how do you know that they’re not lying to you about everything else?”

Angie sighed. “I give up—spill it. What did he lie about?”

I looked away. “It’s not really something I’m comfortable sharing the details of.”

“You had a threesome with someone he said was a stranger, but he already knew her and lied about it.” Angie

looked half excited by her guess. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

Shaking my head, I said, “It’s more complicated than that.”

“More complicated than a threesome? Like an orgy?”

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously? An orgy?”

Angie shrugged. “Hey, I’m guessing wildly because you’re being vague. We’re friends, Kate. Just tell me. I won’t judge.”

I stood up and buried my hands in my coat pockets. “I was sort of seeing someone before I met Brock.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“He actually encouraged me to ask Brock out.”

“Okay, that’s a little strange.”

“And today I found proof that he was Brock.”

“Who?”

“The man I was seeing before him.”

“Whoa, you lost me. How could you not have known he was Brock?”

I grimaced. “Because I never met the other man in person?”

Angie stood and crossed the room to study my expression. “You look way too upset for this to be a joke, but let me see if I have this straight. You were talking to someone—online?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Texting on a phone, mostly.”

“And he was Brock, but you didn’t know who you were talking to.”

I nodded. “Essentially.”

“And he told you to ask Brock out. Come on, that’s sweet.”

Folding my arms, I shook my head vehemently. “Not sweet. Totally fucked up. You have no idea how guilty I’ve felt this whole time. I was getting ready to confess everything to

Brock. But I don't have to confess anything, because *he* was Mr. Elf." As memories of what I'd done with Mr. Elf came flooding back, I went bright red. "That bastard."

"Mr. Elf? Kate, I don't want to pressure you when you're in this state, but you can't leave until you tell me the rest of the story. Why were you talking to a man who called himself Mr. Elf in the first place?"

Suddenly hot, I took off my coat and dropped it on the chair beside me. "If I tell you something, you have to swear you'll never tell anyone."

Angie's eyes rounded. "Who would I tell?"

"Swear."

"Okay, okay. It stays between us."

Once I started, the story poured out. I started with how I'd always written to Santa Claus with my mother, and how after Mom had passed away I'd vented my unhappiness in a letter to him. "I ended the letter by asking Santa for some pretty crude things for Christmas. I decided at the last minute not to mail it. When I got home I realized I had somehow lost it. The next morning I found a prepaid phone on my doorstep with a card that was signed 'Head Elf in charge of the Naughty List.'"

Angie burst out laughing, then sobered when I didn't laugh with her. "Sorry. Go on."

"I was sad and angry and lonely. He started leaving gifts for me with instructions, and I did what he asked me to."

"Like?"

I shrugged again. "Ben Wa balls. Stuff like that."

"He's the friend you said introduced you to toys?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't know who he was at the time?"

"Right."

“Wow.” Angie raised her hands, biting her lip in an obvious attempt not to smile. “I’m just imagining how Brock must have felt when he found your letter. He must have thought he’d hit the lottery. Then he started sending you naughty gifts, and you liked them?”

I covered my face with my hands. “It was a game, and for a while it was fun. When I think about what he had me do, in front of Brock, in a way that Brock wouldn’t know, I could die. He knew. He knew exactly what I was doing. Oh, my God, he must have been laughing at me the whole time.”

“Laughing? Doubtful. More likely he was having difficulty hiding his perpetual hard-on. That was every man’s wet dream. He told you what to do to him, and you did it.”

“I can’t ever look at him again.”

Angie was quiet for a moment, then said, “I could be wrong, but when we talked about Mr. Elf—” Angie chuckled, then stopped and continued, “Sorry, I can’t say that with a straight face. When you mentioned the man who introduced you to sex toys, you sounded grateful to him.”

I lowered my hands. “I was. I felt like I was sinking before I met Mr. Elf. I know it sounds insane, but he jolted me out of a depression I didn’t realize I was falling into. He challenged me to do things I wouldn’t normally do, to not care what people thought of me. Mr. Elf was partly the reason why I said hi to you the first day we met. I used to be very shy. I normally would have looked away and walked by without saying anything.”

“So Brock did you a favor.”

Grudgingly, I nodded. “Yes, but he lied about it.”

“Did you ask him if he was Mr. Elf?”

“No, but come on, that’s a pretty big thing to keep to yourself.”

“I understand why you’re upset, but I don’t think you should break up with him over this.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

Angie smiled. “You’re beginning to sound like me.”

I smirked at that comment. “Well then, you can blame me when your sons start swearing.” In a more serious tone, I added, “My ex-husband lied about everything. I don’t know if I can forgive Brock for this.”

“Brock didn’t technically lie. He didn’t tell you everything, but that’s not the same thing.”

“He played me, Angie.”

Angie sat back down on the couch. “Yes, but it was a game you admit was good for you. So, where’s the harm? He obviously cares about you. Anyone with two eyes can tell he’s in love with you—he’s even said it himself.”

I sat beside Angie on the couch again. “So, I just pretend I don’t know? I don’t think I can do that.”

Angie laughed and rubbed her hands together. “Oh, hell no. He thinks he outsmarted you. You need to give him a taste of his own medicine. Good, harmless fun, laced with a little bit of payback, sounds like just what he deserves.”

“How would I do that?”

“You need to text Mr. Elf.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Mr. Elf, I Have a Problem

Brock

THE NEXT DAY I sat at my desk and attempted to work. I hadn't slept at all; not talking to Kate was driving me crazy. I had to read every email twice, and my headache, which no number of over-the-counter pills could manage, wasn't helping.

The door to the work trailer swung open and slammed shut as Tyler burst in. "Hey, good news, it was Summer the other night. Or is that bad news? I just realized something: On one hand, I didn't accidentally sleep with both of them. On the other hand, I didn't sleep with both of them. *Shit*, I was really happy when I got the text from Summer saying she enjoyed the other night, but now I'm a little bummed at the same time. You know what I mean?" He sank into a chair across from me and said, "What happened to you? You look like crap."

I shook my head and gritted my teeth. "Nothing. What do you need? I emailed you my okay on the latest plans you sent over."

"I was in the area and thought I'd drop by to see you. Nothing, huh? I know I told you I liked you better miserable, but just looking at you is bringing me down. Want to go for a beer?"

I glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's ten in the morning."

"Why be the boss if you can't do what you want, when you want? That's why I freelance. I could fly off to Europe for a week, right now, if I wanted to. Nothing to stop me."

"Or hit a bar on a Thursday morning."

“Hey, you’re the one who looks like you need a drink.”

I leaned back in my chair. “Kate’s not taking my calls.”

“Want me to get you a box of tissues or go ask her for your balls back?”

“Shut the fuck up. I’m serious. I may have really screwed it up with her.”

Tyler crossed his legs at the ankles. “So you came to me for advice.”

“Actually, you came here. But I probably should ask you what you think. Anything is better than what I’m doing now.”

“Which is?”

“Waiting for my new phone to come in. I smashed mine this morning when I tried to call her and it still went straight to voice mail.”

Tyler nodded sympathetically. “Tell me what you did, and I’ll tell you how to fix it.”

“I told her I love her.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. And now she’s not answering my calls.”

“Fuck. There’s no coming back from that.”

“Thanks for the pep talk,” I said bitterly. “We should do this again. I feel so much better now.”

“Hey, if I thought it would work out, I’d tell you to send her flowers. But when women run from those three words, it’s over. Done.”

“So going over to her house after work today is a bad idea?”

“Unless you like living dangerously. I believe the legal term is ‘stalking’.”

I laid my head down on the desk. “It was going so well. Why did I have to open my mouth and fuck it up?”

“I ask myself that all the time, but then I remind myself there are millions of women in the United States, so chances are I’ll meet another one I like. That cheers me up.”

I sat back up and shook my head sadly. “I’m not going to find another Kate.”

Tyler stood up and sighed. “Brock, forget her. Seriously. She was pretty and nice, but you can find that combination again.”

I slammed a hand down on the desk. “I don’t want to find it again. I want Kate.”

“Want me to date her and be an absolute dick? That might send her running back to you.”

I stood. “You touch her and I’ll kill you.”

“Okay, so that’s out. I’m just tossing ideas out there. Don’t flip out on me.” Tyler rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You’re right, if you’re not ready to move on, there really isn’t anything you can do besides go see her and hope for the best.” He headed toward the door. “Coffee run?”

I nodded. “Sure.” I was putting on my coat when a beep sounded deep within my desk. At first I dismissed it as my imagination. Then, realizing what it was, I knew I’d lose my mind if I didn’t check the prepaid phone. “I just remembered I have something I need to do. How about lunch tomorrow? I’ll head down your way.”

Tyler shrugged. “Tomorrow works. Hey, good luck with Kate. I mean it.”

“I know you do.”

As soon as Tyler was gone, I whipped open my desk drawer and pulled out the phone. It was on, which was strange, but since I had checked it recently I figured I must have left it that way by accident. It still had a charge.

And one new message.

I dropped into my chair with the phone still in my hand.

One new message from Kate to Mr. Elf.

Why would Kate contact me—him—now?

I opened my messages and read her text:

Kate: Mr. Elf, I have a problem, and I need your advice.

Fuck.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

You're the One Who Taught Me

Kate

“**W**HAT IF HE doesn't answer?” I asked from my seat at the island in Angie's kitchen.

Angie had her back to me while she washed out baby bottles in the sink. “He'll answer.”

I put the phone down on the counter in front of her and stood. “We haven't used the phones in over a month. He might have forgotten he even has it.”

Angie turned, wiping her hands on a towel beside her. “The phone was charged when you found it, right?”

“Yes.”

“That means he's still checking it. What phone do you know that would hold a charge for a month?”

I sighed and sat back down. “None. Mine was dead. I can't believe I dug it out of the trash—for what? What are we doing, Angie? What do we hope to get out of this?”

“If you don't know, then you need to think this through. I thought we were going to have some harmless fun with him. What are you planning?”

“I don't know. Part of me wants to throw this phone away for good this time and never talk to either of them again—to pretend none of this happened.”

“You can do that. It'll be awkward at first, but denial is a well-populated place. I've met many people who live there.”

“But whenever I think about never seeing Brock again I get really sad. I don't want to lose him. I want him to fix this. I

want to trust him again.”

“So, this is about getting him to prove himself?”

I met my friend’s eyes. “Yes, I guess that’s what I’m hoping will happen. That and . . . I’d like to make him squirm a little before I tell him I know what he did.”

Angie smiled. “I like the squirm part. Mike and I came up with some fun ways to do it.”

“You told Mike? You swore you wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“It’s just Mike. Plus, oh, my God, thank you. We were laughing like kids last night when I told him your story. It didn’t matter that we were both exhausted—we had the best night together. Talking about what you did with your Mr. Elf gave Mike a few ideas. He said he’s going shopping today after work. Toy shopping. I may have to take you up on that offer to babysit after all. It was wonderful, Kate. Really wonderful.”

I wanted to be upset with my friend, but the sincere gratitude on Angie’s face made that difficult. “I’m glad something good came out of this.”

“Of course Mike started off saying we should sympathize with Brock. He thinks Brock really loves you. It’s amazing, though, how good sex can sway a man’s loyalty. Mike is totally on our team now.”

“We have teams?” My eyes rounded.

Angie raised both hands as if shaking invisible pom-poms and said, “Go, Team Kate.”

I closed my eyes and covered them with one hand. “Maybe we shouldn’t do this.” Just then the prepaid phone beeped, announcing an incoming message. My eyes flew open and my mouth rounded with shock.

Angie rushed over to the counter. “What are you waiting for? Check it.”

“Do you think he knows that I know?”

“How would he?”

“I was upset when I left his office. His sister might have said something.”

“There’s only one way to find out, Kate. You’re killing me. The twins are going to wake up soon. Check the damn message.”

I picked up the phone and opened the messages folder.

H. E.: I thought you had made your choice, Kate. Having second thoughts?

I held out the phone to show Angie the text. “How do I answer?”

Angie pursed her lips. “Remember, you’re actually talking to Brock. So, make sure whatever you say is what you want him to hear. He’s listening, Kate. Tell him how you feel.”

Kate: Brock said he loves me.

H. E.: That was soon.

Kate: Yes. Too soon. I don’t believe him.

H. E.: Sounds like something you should discuss with him and not me.

Kate: I can’t ask him if he loves me. He’ll simply say yes. Even if he doesn’t. People lie. All my ex-husband did was lie to me. He said he loved me too, but he didn’t. Those three words don’t mean as much to me as they used to.

H. E.: Do you love him?

Kate: I don’t know. Sometimes I think I do. Sometimes I get scared and never want to see him again. It would be different if I believed he really loved me. How do I find out the truth?

H. E.: They say love is a leap of faith.

Kate: People who say that haven’t crashed and burned. Fuck leaping. I want proof.

Angie bent so she was shoulder to shoulder with me. She gave me a thumbs-up. “You tell him, Kate.”

H. E.: What would you consider proof?

Kate: There are areas of our relationship I'm not entirely happy with. If I told him what they were, do you think he would change for me?

H. E.: A man who loves you would at least try.

Kate: Even if it's about how he is in the bedroom?

Angie whistled as she read what I was typing. "You're good. I would have told him that nothing short of a cock piercing would prove he loved me, but this is sheer genius." When I looked up from my phone in surprise, Angie continued, "Don't let me break your stride. You're doing fine. Piercings take too long to heal, anyway. This is awesome. Hit him where it hurts—his performance pride."

H. E.: You're not happy with the sex you've been having?

I hesitated. I'd never been one who sought revenge or who would ever intentionally make another person suffer in any way. But even though Brock's game had ended up helping me, he'd had just a little too much fun at my expense. I remembered how he'd pushed me to call him Master. How he'd punished me for not obeying him without question. Oh, yes, he deserved to squirm a bit before I broke it to him that I knew the truth.

Kate: It was fun at first. It's just getting old. We're always talking about fantasies and trying to live them out. I want to have nice, normal sex once in a while. How do I tell him that?

H. E.: I'm not a sex therapist, Kate, but the easiest way would be to tell him.

Kate: I can't talk to him like I talk to you. I know it doesn't make sense, but I trust you.

H. E.: You're right, it doesn't. I could be anyone.

Kate: Maybe it's because I don't consider you real that I feel like I can be myself with you. I can tell you anything. Will you help me figure out if he loves me?

H. E.: Does this mean our game is on again? Are you looking for a master?

Angie burst out laughing. “You have to give him credit for asking. He’s definitely a boundary pusher. Set him straight, Kate.”

Oh, I will.

Kate: No. But I will describe how it goes with him. In hot, graphic detail. If you help me.

H. E.: You’re playing a dangerous game, Kate.

Kate: You’re the one who taught me to enjoy games, Mr. Elf. Are you in or not?

There was a long pause.

H. E.: I’m in.

I turned the phone off. My hands were shaking, but I was smiling. “Let him stew on that until I text him tomorrow, right?”

Angie grinned in approval. “I love it. Have you talked to him today? I mean, as Brock?”

“No. He’s been calling, but I didn’t answer because I didn’t know what to say. Do you think I should contact him now?”

Angie shook her head and leaned back against the counter behind her. “You are way too nice, Kate. If you aren’t going to let him sweat a little over this, you might as well tell him everything now.”

I chewed my bottom lip. “I didn’t think this would be so hard. I feel guilty already.”

Angie handed me the prepaid phone. “Then throw the phone back in the trash and end the game now. Go confess and talk it out like mature adults.”

I weighed the phone in my hand. “I should.”

“But?”

“It’s kind of exciting to be talking to Mr. Elf again—even more now that I know he’s Brock.” I shook my head in confusion. “Does that even make sense? I mean, is there any way this can end well?”

Angie shrugged. “What’s the worst-case scenario? He finds out? How can he be upset when he did the same thing to you? The way I see it, worst case: He can’t take what he dishes out, and then he’s not the guy for you. Best case: You put him through his paces, and he comes out a better man for it, and one you trust again.”

“I have a feeling you could sell legs to a centipede,” I said, smiling reluctantly.

Angie smiled back. “I wasn’t always knee-deep in diapers, you know. I left behind a marketing career for all this.” She waved her arms around.

“Are you happy, Angie?”

Suddenly serious, Angie nodded. “Yes. I gripe. I miss my friends at work. But this is important. Mike says if I want to go back to work he’ll figure something out with his schedule. The boys are growing so fast—I know we’ll come to that soon enough. But for now, I want to be here with them. How about you?”

I traced the edge of the table with one hand. “I feel like I’ve been in limbo for too long. I waited for my mother to pass. Waited for my divorce papers to come in. Now I’m waiting to find out how Brock really feels about me. Meanwhile, I’m doing nothing.”

Angie walked over and put a hand on my shoulder. “You realize Brock can’t make you happy, right? No one can. Find a goal outside of him and do something to work toward it every day. That way, no matter how this turns out, you’ll be okay.”

I stood up and hugged Angie. “Tell Mike I’ll babysit the boys the entire weekend.”

Angie hopped in her embrace. “Are you serious? I thought you and Brock were going away to the Cape.”

I shot her a huge smile. “I’ll tell him I want to see how he is with children. A weekend with your kids sounds like a perfect test.”

“Have I created a monster?”

“Do you want a babysitter?”

“I’m shutting up now before you change your mind. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

All the Time You Need

Brock

WAITING FOR MY crew to leave for the day was excruciating. I wanted to cut my day short and hightail it to Kate's house, but I didn't want to let on that I knew anything. If Kate was confused enough to be reaching out to a man she didn't know, I wanted to make sure I played the situation right.

I hadn't lost her yet and had no intention of doing so now. As I closed up the office, Linda met me just outside the trailer.

"Did you talk to Kate yet?"

I shook my head and started walking toward the parking lot with my sister. "I'm heading over there now to do just that."

"Did I tell you that she—?"

I stopped. "Lin, I love you, but I don't want to talk about Kate with you. Let me handle it, okay?"

"I just thought you should know—"

"Linda, it's been a long couple of days, but there is nothing you can do to make this easier. Kate and I need to figure this out ourselves. You can help me by not getting involved, understand? Don't call her, trying to smooth things over. Don't talk to your friends about her. Let this play out. Can you do that for me?"

Linda didn't look happy about it, but she agreed. "I just want you to know I care."

I gave her a kiss on the side of her head, then a mock punch to the arm. "I know you do. Trust me, though, I've got

this.”

A short time later, I repeated those words to myself as I rang Kate’s doorbell. “I’ve got this.”

Kate opened the door about a foot and said, “Sorry I didn’t answer your calls.”

“I missed you, Kate.” She opened the door the rest of the way, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt with her hair tied back in a neat ponytail. I’d never seen her more beautiful, but I didn’t say that. I waited for her to speak first.

“I needed time to figure out a few things.”

“And have you?”

“I think so. But there are things we need to talk about, Brock.”

“That’s why I’m here. I’ll listen as long as you want to talk. Although it might be easier inside where it’s not as frigidly cold.”

Kate backed up to allow me in. “Sorry. Come on in.”

I followed her to the living room. She sat in a single chair. I chose the couch next to it. She looked nervous. I was tempted to pull her into my arms and kiss her until she stopped worrying, but I didn’t want to push her. She said she couldn’t speak to me as easily as she could speak to Mr. Elf, and I wanted to change that. “You can tell me anything, Kate. I’m not going anywhere. Not unless you tell me to.”

Kate looked down at her hands in her lap and said, “I feel like we’ve been on fast-forward since we met. I haven’t had time to catch my breath. Being with you is exciting, but part of it still feels unreal. Maybe because we’re always playing games or pretending to be other people. I don’t know. Can we tone it down a bit? Just be you and me for a little while and see how that goes?”

“Come here, Kate.”

Kate crossed the space to sit beside me. I took her hands in mine. “We can tone it down as much as you want. I rushed you, and I shouldn’t have. I’m happy you feel comfortable enough to tell me this.”

Kate met my eyes. “Honesty is important to me. So is trust. I need more time, Brock. I gave my heart to a man once, and he trampled on it. I’m not eager to do that again.”

“I’m not your ex. I’d never cheat on you.”

“Or lie to me?”

I faltered on that one. I wanted to say I’d never lie to her, but was keeping my dual identity a secret really a lie? “I would never intentionally hurt you.”

“I want to believe that.”

“You will, but like you said, trust takes time. Luckily, we have that, Kate. We have all the time you need.”

“Speaking of time, is it too late to cancel our place at the Cape? Angie needs a babysitter this weekend, and I told her we could do it.”

“We?” I remembered the last time Kate and I had visited our friends’ home. They had twins, if I remembered right. Watching them was not exactly the romantic weekend I’d planned, but I wasn’t about to say no. “Sure.”

“You’re really fine with it?”

I gave her what I hoped was my most charming grin. “You’ll be there. That’s enough for me.”

She studied my expression for a long moment, then said, “Okay. I’ll tell her. Thanks.”

We sat there, looking into each other’s eyes, until I finally broke the silence. “Have you eaten?”

Kate shook her head.

“Want to make something together?” I asked. “I am gifted at boiling water. And the way I place the pasta into it—well, I

don't want to brag, but it's inspiring.”

Kate chuckled. “I studied gourmet cooking at Le Cordon Bleu. If you make the pasta, I'll make the sauce.”

I stood and held out my hand to Kate. “That's a deal I'll take.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

How Far Does This Game Have to Go?

Kate

I DECIDED AGAINST contacting Mr. Elf the next day or during the weekend that followed. I eventually had to admit I was enjoying myself so much I'd almost forgotten this was a game.

After cooking together, Brock stayed over at my place. We watched a movie and snuggled on the couch, then talked until well past midnight. He told me stories of what it had been like growing up with Linda and all of her friends, many of whom had spent so much time at his house it had felt like he'd been born into a large family instead of a small one. I asked him about his friends and loved that so many of them had been close to him since grade school. Tyler. Chris. Even Mike. They had all played sports together and stayed in the same area for college. His stories had a small-town feel to them, even though Misty Falls was more of a city.

While holding me in his arms, Brock had asked about my friends and family. At first I'd been reluctant to share. My experiences didn't mirror his. But Brock waited patiently, and finally I opened up and told him about my mother and how she'd wanted me to have a better life than she'd had. I explained that Mom had kept me separate from the kids in Misty Falls because she'd thought I would be happier if I entered into the world of the wealthy. It was why I'd studied languages, played a variety of instruments, and could recite poetry. My mother had wanted me not only to break into that world, but also to appreciate everything it had to offer. And to

create that opportunity for me, my mother had worked long hours in Boston, and commuted back and forth to Misty Falls.

“So you weren’t from a wealthy family? Everyone always assumed you were. Even I did,” Brock had admitted.

Lost in my memories, I had looked past him. “Appearances were important to my mother. That sounds worse than I mean. From what I remember about my extended family, they were into some dangerous lifestyles. My mother wanted to make sure I knew there was more to life than how she’d been raised. She went to school, tried to make a better life for herself, but she kept getting pulled back into—well, a life she wouldn’t discuss with me. She protected me from it as much as she could, but ultimately she decided only a clean break would work. Mom thought people with money were different. That life with them would somehow be better.”

Brock hugged me and kissed my temple. “That’s not true in my experience.”

I felt so close to Brock that I shared my inner fears. “Mine, neither. Wayne, my ex, was perfect on paper, but he didn’t love me, not by any definition I could accept. He wanted a beautiful wife he could show off at events. I thought I had friends where I lived in Boston, but their idea of loyalty and mine seriously differed when it came to having sex with my ex. It has shaken my faith in trusting most people. Life would be easier if people came with labels.”

Brock hadn’t answered at first, but finally he said, “My father would say you have to dig deeper than a label to discover the value of something. To know the stability of any building, you have to spend time studying it, getting to know its structural strengths and weaknesses. Only then can you decide if it’s worth saving.”

“You test it?”

“Sometimes. But I don’t require perfection in projects I take on. I care more about potential. Some projects are worth whatever it takes to save them.”

Like us? I had been tempted right then and there to spill everything and ask him if we could start fresh, but I needed him to confess. He didn't, though. Not even when we slowly and tenderly made love that night. And not the next day, when we woke in each other's arms and started our day with warm, leisurely sex that left a glow on our faces all day.

No, Brock didn't appear to be anywhere near admitting to being Mr. Elf, and that was why I didn't feel badly at all when Brock and I watched Angie's twins instead of going away to the Cape. I made sure Brock did his share of feeding and diaper duty that weekend, and had to hide a laugh when one of the boys spit up all over Brock's shirt, forcing him to change into one of Mike's.

I had to admit Brock handled being around children better than I had expected. He spoke to the boys as if they could understand him, and Tim and Tom responded by laughing and grabbing at him, crying only when he put them down. By Sunday Brock was sitting on the couch watching football with a twin boy plastered to either side of him as he cheered on his team. I took a picture of them together, needing to capture that moment, although not fully understanding why.

On Sunday night, after Angie and Mike returned, I claimed I wasn't feeling well and wanted some time alone. Brock gave me a gentle kiss and promised to call the next day. My plan to make him squirm a little before admitting I knew everything was getting jumbled in my head. I should have felt better after spending so much time with him, but instead I was getting angrier with him and more confused. I went to bed early but barely slept.

The next morning I padded down to the kitchen in my pajamas. I'd thought it would be fun talking to my naughty elf again, thought this game would be as wild as our last, but it wasn't. I looked at the photo of Brock with the boys watching football together and said, "Why can't you just be this man? Why do you have to be Mr. Elf too?"

I was in that state of mind when I sent a text.

Kate: Vanilla sex was not the answer.

He wrote back almost immediately.

H. E.: Vanilla?

Kate: You know, nice. Normal.

H. E.: Isn't that what you said you wanted?

Kate: I did, but I didn't know it would be so—boring.

I cringed when I read the words I'd sent. Nothing about being with Brock, in or out of bed, had been boring. I'd said it to hurt him, and that confused me even more. My game was about finding out if he loved me, not getting back at him.

Right?

Brock had done everything I'd asked him to. I thought that would make me happy. Instead, I wanted to reach through the phone and slap him.

H. E.: Did you tell him that?

Kate: No. Shouldn't he know me well enough to sense how I feel?

Like now, Brock. Shouldn't you know I'm waiting for you to be eaten up with guilt? How far does this game have to go before you decide I'm worth the truth?

H. E.: He probably thought you were happy.

Kate: Well, I'm not.

H. E.: What was lacking?

An idea came to me that I dismissed at first. It was a little mean-spirited and not mature at all. Still, I was talking to a man who called himself an elf, who had left sex toys on my doorstep and called them presents. He deserved to get a present of his own.

Kate: Fun. You sent me some amazing gifts. Maybe I should send Brock a few.

H. E.: What kind of gifts?

Kate: I have an idea, but I don't want to discuss it yet. I'll tell you about them later if they work.

I turned off the phone and reached for my laptop. I had some online shopping to do.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

You'll Wear It?

Brock

I THREW MYSELF into work for the rest of the day. When I received a text from Kate telling me she couldn't see me that night, I forced myself to sound casual as I wrote back that I would see her later in the week. I didn't want to rush Kate, but I was slowly going out of my mind. At least we were back together and, thanks to her texts with Mr. Elf, I had an added insight into where her head was. I didn't like that she reached out to a man she didn't actually know instead of coming to me with her concerns, but, since the other man was really me, I thought it was practically the same thing.

The next day, when I returned home after a stress-relieving two hours at the gym, I found a gift from Kate outside my apartment door. The small, white box wrapped in red velvet ribbon had a card attached that read: *I saw this and thought of you. Kate*

The thought of the gifts I'd given her had me impatiently tearing the paper off. Disappointingly, it was only *Be My Valentine* perfume.

I took out my phone to call Kate and thank her, then realized I had Mr. Elf's prepaid phone in my hand and cursed, dropped it back into my coat pocket, and hunted through my pockets for my other phone. *That would not have been good. The last thing Kate needs now is another reason to break up with me.*

She answered on the second ring. "Hi."

I walked through my apartment, shedding clothes along the way. "You realize Valentine's Day is still weeks away."

Her voice was heaven in my ear. “You found my gift? I’m glad. I hope you like it.”

Standing in my bedroom in just boxer briefs, I said, “The perfect gift would be you here in my bed tonight, but I’ll take what I can get.”

She laughed nervously. “We agreed to slow it down a bit. Being with you every day has been wonderful, but I need to get my life in order, and to do that I need a little space.”

“Space?” I hated that word. Every man should. He usually heard it right before a woman announced she was calling it off or sleeping with another man.

“Yes. I can’t keep going as I have been. Doing nothing. Putting off making decisions about what I want to do. I’ve started applying for jobs at local places. I need to get out of this house. Hopefully I’ll find something I enjoy doing.”

“That’s really good, Kate.” *Local. Thank God.*

“Thank you for being so understanding, Brock.”

“I want you to be happy. You know that.”

“Speaking of happy, what do you think of the perfume?”

I took off the cover and sprayed it in the air, then gagged a bit on the nauseatingly sweet smell of it. “It’s unique.”

“Then you’ll wear it?”

I took another whiff and shuddered. “Me? I thought it was for you.”

“It’s unisex and one of my favorites.” Her voice became low and husky. “I’ve always found it really sexy.”

I placed the small bottle on my bedside table and made a face at it. If Kate liked it enough to buy it for me, I would wear it. I turned my back to it for now.

“I have another gift for you. I thought I’d give it to you tomorrow night when you come here for dinner.” She paused, then added, “If you’d like to come over.”

Hell, yes. “I’ll be there. But, you don’t have to give me anything, Kate.”

“I already bought it, and I’m actually pretty excited to see you in it.”

In it?

Shit.

“Can you do something for me?” Kate asked in a near whisper, sending my blood rushing to my already half-erect cock.

“Anything.”

“Will you wear the perfume all day tomorrow? I’ll be running around filling out applications and feeling nervous. It’d make me happy, imagining you wearing it and thinking about me throughout the day.”

Oh, I’ll be thinking about you all right. Thinking how soon I can get in the shower at your house to wash off that smell. “Of course I will. Then I’ll come over for dinner. How does five thirty sound?”

“Perfect. See you tomorrow, Brock.”

I stripped off my boxer briefs and took a long, hot shower, letting the water beat against my back while I jacked off to the possibilities of how Kate and I would spend the next night together. Wild and crazy, or slow and tender—I didn’t care. Kate didn’t want vanilla sex. Well, tomorrow night I was going to bring my best. I would make Kate come so many times she would be too exhausted to text Mr. Elf.

And I’ll do it wearing whatever the hell she bought me. He closed his eyes. *Edible underwear? Some costume? What would a woman want a man to wear?*

Hopefully nothing that matches that perfume.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Revenge Should Be Fun

Kate

“**Y**OU SENT HIM to work wearing women’s perfume?” Angie asked gleefully during an afternoon walk with me. She leaned forward to push her double stroller up a steep section of sidewalk.

I nodded and my eyes narrowed. “I did. I bought it at a discount store. It’s not only for women, it’s also awful.”

“So, a test of his love for you is how bad he’ll allow himself to smell?”

I looked away, then back. “No, I bought it because I can’t believe he hasn’t said a single thing about Mr. Elf. Not one little hint. I don’t think he feels guilty about it at all. You should see what I bought him to wear tonight. He’s going to look like a complete idiot, and he won’t even know it.”

“Be careful, Kate.”

I glanced over and was surprised to see how concerned Angie looked. “Careful? You almost suggested piercing his genitals. All I did was give him women’s perfume and ask him to wear it. How is that crossing a line?”

Angie wrinkled her nose at me. “It’s not what you’re asking him to do that worries me, it’s why. You told me this wasn’t about revenge. Now it seems like it is. Do you love this guy or do you hate him? Testing a man is different than trying to humiliate him.”

I stuffed my hands angrily in my coat pockets. “You’re right. This isn’t what I thought the game would be about, but I can’t help myself. I’m so angry with him. He’s doing

everything I ask, but all I really want is for Mr. Elf not to exist. To have never existed. I want to go back to seeing Brock as the simple, honest man I thought he was before I found the phone.”

Angie shrugged. “I want to not have stretch marks, but you know what? Shit happens, Kate. I’m beginning to think you shouldn’t play this game with Brock. You’re not a spiteful person. This is not the way to find out if he loves you.”

I stopped walking. “First you tell me he should pay. Now you’re second-guessing everything I’m doing and calling me spiteful? Maybe the only mistake I’ve made was turning to you for advice.”

Angie stopped her stroller and turned toward me. “I said you’re *not* spiteful. Listen, you’ve been through a lot this year. I don’t want you to lose Brock over something stupid that I thought could be funny. You were supposed to enjoy the game, Kate. You’re not. End it now.”

I felt cornered and exposed. I snapped, “You know what I’m sick of? People telling me what I should or shouldn’t do. My mother planned out every moment of my childhood. My ex-husband tried to make me into the wife he thought I should be. The last thing I need is a friend who thinks she knows what I should do better than I do. You have two kids, Angie. Mother them, not me.”

I turned and walked away from Angie. Angie called after me, but I didn’t stop. I kept walking until I was safely back inside my house. I threw my coat on the back of a chair and stood in the middle of the living room for several minutes, shaking in anger. As the adrenaline rush subsided, I sank into the couch and dialed a number on my phone.

“Angie?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken my bad mood out on you.”

“It’s okay. I know you’re confused right now.”

“I bought him a fishnet thong. Should I throw it away?”

Angie chuckled. “Wow. That’s quite an image you just gave me. Before I answer that, I need to say something. You were completely justified in telling me to back off. Your relationship with Brock and how you handle it is your business. I wouldn’t want you telling me how to handle Mike. So, ask me, if you want my opinion, but know that I’ll be okay if you don’t follow it.”

Warmth spread through me. I didn’t know what I’d done to earn a friend like Angie, but I was so glad I had her. “I want your opinion. Fishnet or no fishnet?”

Angie was quiet for a moment, then said, “Fishnet, if you give it a chance to be sexy. Don’t laugh at him while he’s in it. Hey, I’ve seen him at the gym. Brock has an amazing body. He may rock that thong. It really isn’t about what you give him, Kate. It’s why. I don’t believe Brock ever meant to hurt you with his game. Don’t hurt him with yours.”

“I don’t think I can give it to him without smirking.”

Angie chuckled again. “Just laugh with him, Kate. Have fun with it. Hell, tell me where you got it and maybe I’ll pick one up for Mike.”

My eyes rounded. “You really think Mike would wear one?”

“Kate, you have a lot to learn about men. He’d do anything for a blow job. Oh, and me. We can do shit like this to each other and laugh about it later because it’s all in fun. Does that make sense?”

“Angie, I am so lucky to have met you.”

“I feel the same way. Hell, Mike loves that we hang out. You reminded us to make time for each other. Have fun tonight, Kate. Forget about everything else, and just have fun.”



THAT NIGHT, AFTER we had eaten dinner and swapped stories about our week, I led Brock to the living room. My eyes watered a little from the perfume that hung heavy in the air between us. I wondered if he had really worn it all day and felt more than a little guilty thinking he might have.

Once on the couch, I handed him a white rectangular box and said, "I've never been to a strip club. I know I told you I wanted to tone things down, but I bought something I thought would be fun. You don't have to wear it if you don't like it. But I had a fantasy of you stripping for me in this."

He opened the box slowly, and both of his eyebrows shot up into his hairline. He picked up the small scrap of material and inspected it before replacing it in the box. "You want a stripper, huh?"

I wavered back and forth on how much I should push. "Only if you think it'd be fun."

He stood up and shrugged. "I'll need music."

I swallowed hard. "I'll put some on."

The lusty smile he gave me took my breath away. "Then I'll be right back."

I put on some Enrique Iglesias and sat back down on the couch. My heart was beating wildly in my chest. Angie had been right: Anger didn't belong in this part of our relationship.

When Brock returned to the living room a few minutes later, he was still dressed in his suit and tie from work. For a moment I thought he was going to tell me he'd changed his mind. Then I saw him begin to move his hips to the Latin music.

I pulled my legs up on the couch, my lips parting in anticipation as he loosened his tie with slow, rhythmic moves. His eyes never left mine. He whipped the tie off with one final powerful move and threw it on the couch beside me. All the while he moved his body to the music, his hips surprisingly fluid. He shrugged off his jacket, tossing it down on the floor. Slowly, purposefully, he began to unbutton his blue work shirt.

I gasped audibly when he pulled it free of his pants and flung it on top of his jacket.

I had seen him naked many, many times, but as he danced for me, I appreciated the flawlessness of his body as I never had before. His shoulders were perfectly muscled. His abs were flat and toned, with just enough hair to guide a woman's mouth southward. He was flexing for me as he moved, but there was nothing comical about his dance. Had he been on a stage, I had no doubt I would have been trampled by a stampede of women vying to hand him twenties.

His eyes burned with a desire I knew well, and my thighs quivered. He unbuckled his belt and pulled it out, watching me as he did. When his hands finally reached the top of his trousers, I bit my bottom lip to stop from drooling.

He slid his pants off, stepped out of them, and the gift I'd bought as a joke strained to contain him. There was nothing funny about how it held him proudly in place while he stepped closer to me.

The music continued, pulsing between us, and he thrust his hips back and forth with strong, confident moves. He held out a hand to me, and I took it wordlessly, falling naturally into a rhythm with his body as we moved together to the music. He unbuttoned my shirt and let it fall to the floor. As we danced he turned me in his arms and undid my bra with such skill that it effortlessly dropped to the floor. He held my eyes and continued to lead, commanding my body with a mastery that couldn't have come to him without tutelage.

"Where did you learn to dance?" I asked in wonder.

"Don't talk," he said and rolled me into a dip over his strong arm. "Feel." He took advantage of my position to unbutton the top of my skirt, then lifted me so it also fell off. I was left in a pair of silk panties, dancing a rumba with Brock in a thong. It was so sexy I was wet, and we hadn't even kissed.

He picked me up by my hips and stood me on the coffee table. Still moving with the music, he slid my panties down. Once I was fully naked, he swung me up in front of him and ran his mouth and tongue slowly across me as he lowered me. His tongue flicked the inside of my thighs. Teased my shaven mound. He nipped at my stomach and kissed his way to my breasts. All the while, he kept his body moving back and forth to the music in a way that was driving me wild for him.

When we finally kissed, I was out of my mind. I ran my hands through his hair and thrust my tongue in his mouth. He walked me over to the fireplace and set me on my feet in front of the rug. He lifted one of my legs so it was hitched on the coffee table, spreading me wide for him. He stood behind me, kissing my neck and stroking my ass with his thick cock. The feel of the netting on my bare skin aroused me even more.

One of his hands caressed my clit, bringing me from ready to whimpering for what only he could give. His other hand roughly massaged my breasts, tightening on them each time he thrust a finger inside me.

He kissed my shoulder, my back, every inch of me, while his hands worked their magic. Each time I reached for him he took control again and brought me to a mindless level of pleasure with his caresses.

I came with a shudder and sagged forward as I floated back to earth. He released me for a moment, then returned, now sheathed in a condom instead of the thong, and bent me over before him. He thrust upward powerfully. I opened my legs wider for him, wanting him deeper. He pounded into me, and I floated toward a second orgasm.

I cried out my climax and thought he would join me, but instead he withdrew. He turned me around and lifted me, settling me onto him with an ease that was ecstasy all by itself. Still inside me, he walked to the edge of the couch and laid me on it.

His hands roved over my body as he entered me again and again. I gripped his forearms, not once concerned that I could

fall, because I trusted him completely. He threw his head back and groaned as he finally came, while an explosion of heat rushed through me. Orgasm, or the sheer pleasure of having him come inside me, I couldn't be sure. Every inch of me was on fire, burning just for him.

He gently laid me down on the couch and cleaned himself off. When he returned, he was already half erect again, and I sat up and crooked a finger at him. He walked over to stand in front of me, and I took him eagerly in my mouth. I dug my fingers into his well-defined thighs and took him deeper and deeper. When he came I welcomed it, enjoying his pleasure as much as he had enjoyed mine.

Spent, he sank onto the couch beside me and pulled me into his arms.

I said, "You're a really good dancer."

He kissed my lips gently. "You're pretty good yourself."

"Are you going to tell me where you learned those moves?"

"Which ones?" he asked with a smile.

I slapped his chest playfully. "The *dance* ones."

He grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips. "Linda made me take dance classes when we were in college. She wanted to learn and didn't want to go alone. She told me it would come in handy one day. Too bad I can't tell her how it finally did." He eased his arm out from beneath me and stood, gloriously naked, like my own private, naughty gigolo. "Come on, let's go to bed."

A sudden panic filled me, erasing the warm glow of our lovemaking. *He's never going to tell me. Looks like I have a choice to make. I need to either confront him with what I know or walk away. Because being with him and not trusting him is killing me. I can't think straight around him. I can't think straight when we're apart. I don't know what I'm doing anymore.* "Do you mind not staying over tonight?"

He frowned down at me. “What’s wrong?”

I picked my shirt off the floor and put it on and waved a hand around, referencing our clothing. “Nothing. Everything. Tonight was great, but—” I tapped my temple frantically.

He pulled on his pants, keeping his eyes on me as he did. “I don’t understand.”

I put my skirt back on, then turned off the music. *No more putting it off.* I walked over to my purse, took out a phone, and typed his name into it. A beep went off in one of the pockets of his coat. Tears filled my eyes. “Now do you understand?”

A flush spread over his cheeks; he went pale as he looked back at his jacket and then to the phone in my hands. “Shit, Kate. I can explain.” He frowned again. “Wait, how long have you known?”

I shook my head sadly. “Long enough. I thought I could get you to tell me the truth by playing games like you did, but I’m not good at them, Brock, not like you.”

He gripped her arms. “Kate, listen to me.”

I pulled myself free from him. “Do you know how I felt when I found that phone in your desk drawer? I thought I had finally found someone I could believe in and then there it was—proof that I didn’t know you at all. I trusted you—both of you—and you both humiliated me.”

“You said you enjoyed what we did.”

Blinking back tears, I waved my hands angrily. “It’s not about the sex. It’s about how it felt to open up to you and trust you, only to find out you were playing me. I am so angry with you for not being the man I thought you were. I keep trying to move past it. I keep thinking you can prove I’m wrong, but maybe you can’t. Maybe nothing good can come from the kind of start we had. All I know is, being with you hurts even when it’s wonderful. In fact, it hurts more when it’s wonderful because I know it’s not real.”

I began to walk away but Brock blocked me. “Kate, what we have is real. I do love you. I should have told you everything, but I didn’t want to lose you. Don’t talk like it’s over.”

I shook my head sadly and walked to the door, holding it open. “It is over. Go home, Brock. I can’t do this anymore.”

He studied my expression, then finally sighed. He picked up the rest of his clothing and stepped out into the cold night. “I never meant to hurt you, Kate.”

I closed the door on him and leaned against it, whispering to myself, “But you did. You did hurt me, and I don’t know if I can forgive you.”

I sank to the floor and wrapped my arms around my knees.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I'll Prove It

Brock

I STOOD ON Kate's porch long after I heard her move away from the door. I wanted to crash through the physical barrier between us and demand that she listened to my side of the story. The problem was, I deserved to be tossed to the curb.

I'd known from the moment I'd picked up her letter and hadn't immediately returned it to her that this day might come. In the beginning it had been a game, and a fun one at that. But when I had taken the game too far and almost lost her the first time, I knew I wanted a whole lot more than to just fuck her.

I'd never been the romantic type. At least, that had always been a common complaint from the women I'd dated. I was a practical man. Sex was great, and dating made sex possible. Women often asked me out; when I was in the mood I said yes. Dinner or a movie was all it had usually taken to seal the deal with them. I'd never felt badly about moving on because I'd never made them any promises.

I give Tyler shit, but I am just as bad.

How did I go from that to freezing my balls off because I can't leave the porch of a woman who told me we're over?

I laid an open hand on Kate's door. *I fucked up, Kate. I know I did. I should have confessed everything when I had the chance.*

I took out the prepaid phone and read through the recent messages she'd sent me. It was obvious now that she had known she was writing to me. As I scrolled through the

conversation, one exchange jumped out at me. I read it several times.

Kate: Sometimes I get scared and never want to see him again. It would be different if I believed he really loved me. How do I find out the truth?

H. E.: They say love is a leap of faith.

I shook my head in disgust now at the flippant response I'd given her.

Kate: People who say that haven't crashed and burned. Fuck leaping. I want proof.

The answers to my questions were right there, as was the evidence of how deeply she'd been hurt. She'd laid her feelings out for me, fears and all:

Kate: Will you help me figure out if he loves me?

And what did I fucking say to her? Did I tell her how I felt? Did I man up? No.

H. E.: Does this mean our game is on again? Are you looking for a master?

What the fuck was I thinking? Oh, my God, I am such an asshole. Kate deserves better than this, better than me. I should walk away and let her move on to the next man.

Yet I didn't move from my place near her door. *I would if I wasn't so fucking in love with her.* I stood out in the cold so long I started to feel foolish. Finally, I pocketed the phone and went home, but only because I'd thought of a plan for how to win her back.

The next morning I knocked on her door. When it remained closed, I said, "I love you, Kate. I'm an ass, and you have every right to be angry with me, but that doesn't change how much I love you. Give me a chance and I'll prove it to you, Kate. That's all I need, one chance." She didn't open the door, but I guessed she was there. I left my present for her against her door and said, "Take your time. I'll be here when you're ready to talk."



Kate

I WAITED UNTIL Brock was gone before I opened the door. The heart-shaped box he'd left reminded me how we had started. I almost closed the door without picking it up, but decided I had to know what he considered an apology gift.

I carried the box into the living room and hugged it before opening it. What if it was a vibrator? If so, he'd be sadly disappointed by my reaction to it this time.

I tore off the cover. There on top of layers of tissue paper was Mr. Elf's phone, smashed and mangled. There was a handwritten note with it.

Dear Kate,

No more games. This time it's just you and me.

And the me in that equation is sorry.

I love you,

Brock

More than anything, I wanted to call Brock and tell him I'd forgiven him, but fear had taken root in my heart, and I wasn't ready to open myself up to being hurt again.

Words were easy to say, but what did they mean in the end? My ex-husband had said he loved me, but that hadn't stopped him from sleeping with all my friends. Wendy had called herself a friend, but in the end she considered fucking Wayne some sick win over me.

Brock said he was sorry. I thought he probably was sorry—sorry he'd been caught. But could I believe the rest of what he'd said? There was no denying Brock and I were compatible in bed. Was all of this because he didn't want to lose that?

I tossed the gift box down on the floor beside the couch.

Too little, too late, Brock.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

If You Love Him

Kate

A WEEK LATER, I bounded up the stairs to Angie's second floor. "Hello. Are you ready yet?"

"Almost," Angie called out from the boys' room. "Get in here and wrangle Tim into his shoes again. I'm in big trouble. They already have their father's sense of humor. Every time I try to get Tom ready, Tim takes something off. Every time I put Tim's clothes back on, Tom has wormed out of something else."

I lifted Tim above my head and made faces that had him laughing. "Tim says Tom's the troublemaker. He's innocent of all charges."

"Sure, his father says the same thing. Hey, how did your interview go?"

"Good. You are now looking at a very important, newly employed, radio station receptionist."

Angie turned from zipping up Tom's coat. "That's great news. And it still has to do with music. Sort of. The most important thing is it gets you out of the house."

I zipped Tim into his coat with expert finesse. "It's mostly talk radio, so it wasn't what I was looking for, but it's a job. I suggested they do a podcast as well, but the station isn't ready to modernize. I don't know that I care, really. It felt good to be out of my house and learning something new."

Angie settled Tom on one hip and smiled.

I rolled my eyes. "Go ahead. You can say it."

“I was right.”

“You were. Now, are we going for our walk or what?”

Angie sat Tom down at her feet while she put on her own coat. “I’m coming. I’m coming.”

Soon we were out in the chilly afternoon air, walking a route we had walked enough that I’d know it blindfolded, but I didn’t care. The sun felt good on my face, and I felt happier than I had in days.

As we passed my house, Angie paused and said, “Does Brock still drop off a gift every morning?”

There goes my good mood. “Yes.”

“And you haven’t broken down and talked to him yet? Not once?”

“I don’t even open the presents.”

“Are you fucking serious?” Angie asked, her mouth falling open.

I shrugged and started walking again. “I don’t want to be tempted. He hurt me, Angie. And even though he’s sorry, I can’t risk that kind of hurt again. Not yet. I need time to heal. I’ve gotten myself all tangled up inside.”

Angie fell into step beside me, uncharacteristically quiet.

I couldn’t help but ask, “No advice today? You’re not going to tell me I’m wrong? That I should give him another chance?”

Angie looked over at me sadly. “I think Brock is a great guy. The two of you were good together. But if you’re not ready, you’re not ready.”

“Maybe if I hadn’t met him so soon after my divorce—”

“Or if you hadn’t asked Santa for a good fuck.”

“Angie . . .”

Angie laughed. “Sorry, but you have to admit your part in all of this. Imagine poor Brock. Mike told me Brock has been

lusting after you half his life. There you were, back in town. Brock was probably trying to figure out how to ask you out. Then, wham, he found that letter. Men don't come across opportunities like that every day. You can't really blame him for going all kinky on you. Especially when you liked it."

The winter air wasn't brisk enough to stop my cheeks from warming. "He should have told me about the game once we got serious."

"Was there a time he could have when you wouldn't have absolutely freaked out on him?"

I opened my mouth to say yes, then closed it with a snap. "No, I guess not."

"I'm not defending him; I'm just saying I can understand why he kept his silence."

"You think I should give him another chance, don't you?"

"What I think doesn't matter. What do you think?"

"I'm scared, Angie. That's it. I wish it were more complicated than that, but there it is. I don't know what I want to do."

Angie gave my arm a pat. "You know what, Kate? You're a lot stronger than you think—and a lot smarter too. Trust your heart on this one. If it says he's not the right one, let those damn presents keep piling up. You don't owe him anything. But if you love him, give him a chance to win you back. He's trying, Kate. You're getting the proof you asked for."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

So You Fold?

Brock

MY FACE WAS blank while looking at the full house I held in my hand. Poker night at Tyler's place was a welcome reprieve from what had otherwise been a crappy week. Chris, Mike, Tyler, some cigars, a few beers, and just enough money on the table to make things interesting.

"I'm out," Mike said and laid his hand down, but he smiled as he did.

Chris raised an eyebrow and joked, "Mike, you understand that's a bad thing, right?"

Tyler took a puff of his cigar, then said, "His wife is sleeping with him again. You could probably take all the money out of his wallet and he'd still look that pathetically happy." He took a second look at me. "Whereas there is no telling what Brock has in his hand because he'll look that miserable even if he has a royal flush." He tossed a twenty onto the pile of money on the table. "I'll see your ten and raise you ten."

Chris threw his cards down. "Too rich for me. I'm out. So, Brock, what happened with you and Kate?"

I threw in a twenty and said, "I'll see your twenty, and I don't want to talk about it."

Tyler thumped his chest. "She broke his heart."

"Fuck you."

Tyler smiled at my response. "He leaves presents on her doorstep every day, even though she won't answer any of his

phone calls. It's kind of sad. And am I the only one worried that he now smells like a girl?"

I gritted my teeth. "The perfume was a gift from Kate."

Tyler rolled his eyes. "Do you think she was fucking with you? Because, dude, that's a woman's perfume."

Mike sat back in his chair and said, "It is, Brock. Angie told me all about it. Kate bought it as a joke. You should stop wearing it."

I put my cards down. "What do you mean as a joke?"

Mike looked away. "I shouldn't have said anything. Angie will kill me."

I stood up. "What do you know?"

Mike let out a long sigh. "Everything. Too much, really. I give you credit for having the balls to do what you did, but you really fucked it up at the end."

Tyler leaned forward, laying his own cards face down. "What did he do, Mike? You have to tell us."

Chris made a skeptical face. "We're talking about Brock here. How bad could it have been?"

Mike said simply, "Let's just say we don't know Brock as well as we think we do. He has a whole other side to him."

"I can't believe you're not going to tell us," Tyler said, stubbing out his cigar. "I would tell you."

The other men at the table said in almost perfect unison, "We know."

I sat back down. "Mike, I don't care what your wife told you, it goes no further than that. I'm serious about Kate. I intend to marry her. But I do want to know what you meant about the gift being a joke."

Mike gave me a sympathetic look. "When Kate found out you hadn't been completely honest with her, she and Angie

decided to screw with you a little. Angie told me it was supposed to get you to confess. I guess that didn't work out."

Tyler interjected. "Confess what? You guys aren't going to say anything? You're fucking killing me here."

Rubbing his chin, Chris asked, "You really love her, don't you?"

My hands clenched in fists. "Yes, I do. But nothing I've done so far has been able to convince her of that. I might have blown my only chance with her."

Mike added, "Don't repeat this, but Angie says Kate is really sad about the breakup. She thinks Kate loves you, so you still have a chance."

With disgust, Tyler said, "I'm taking back all of your man cards. You gossip like a bunch of women. What happened to you?"

I looked at Tyler and shook my head. "Half of what you say is a bullshit act, Tyler. I know because I was you until recently. But I don't care about any of that anymore. Everything changed when Kate came into my life again. I don't want to go back to one-night stands. I want Kate. I want a family. Help me fix this or shut the fuck up. Your choice."

After a long moment, Tyler said, "What have you tried so far?"

I shrugged. "Calling. Texting. Bringing her a gift every day, like you said. I don't know if she even liked what I gave her."

Mike said, "She hasn't opened them."

"Fuck." I grimaced.

Tyler pushed up his shirtsleeves. "Don't worry, as the only intact man at this table, I will come up with a plan."

When Chris and Mike started to say something, I cut them off and said, "Let him speak. Even if it's for comic relief, I have to hear what Tyler thinks I should do."

“Thank you,” Tyler said with some sarcasm, then cracked his knuckles as he got down to business. “You have two problems. One, she won’t open your gifts. That’s easy enough to fix. Don’t wrap them.”

I looked around the table. Tyler’s suggestion made sense in a strange, the-world-is-upside-down kind of way.

Tyler held up two fingers and said, “Two, even though you won’t say what you did, it sounds like it was a royal fuckup. Those require big apologies. Huge. Usually in public. Lucky for you, Valentine’s Day is in two days. If you really want to win her back, you need to do something so over-the-top sappy she has no choice but to forgive you. I even have an idea for that part, but you’re not going to like it.”

Brock looked around the table again and said, “Nothing I’ve done so far has worked, so maybe I should try his ideas.”

Tyler asked, “So you fold?”

I nodded.

Tyler reached forward and gleefully scooped the pile of money toward him. Amidst protests, he merely smiled and said, “Great, here’s my idea.”

CHAPTER FORTY

As Long as We're Together

Kate

THE NEXT MORNING, I heard the doorbell ring. An iPad, with a video playing on its screen, greeted me when I opened the door. I bent closer and saw Brock's friend Chris listing all the reasons why he thought I should give Brock a second chance. He talked about how long he had known Brock and what a good person he was. A moment later, Angie's husband, Mike, was reciting almost the same message. The video cut to Tyler, who sounded sincere as he said the only person he could imagine Brock being with was someone as classy as I was, and that anyone who could get Brock to wear women's perfume for a week was someone Tyler had to respect. Linda, Brock's sister, talked about what a great family man Brock was. Even his parents chimed in to say they missed me.

I was near tears by the time Brock came on the screen. He looked tired, but he smiled into the camera as he spoke directly to me. "I reserved a table at Henri's for tomorrow night at six. I'll be there, waiting for you. If there is any chance you can forgive me, meet me there. Don't decide right now, Kate. Go inside. Open my other presents. They are proof that I mean it when I say I love you. There has never been anyone else for me, Kate, and there never will be."

I stopped the video and took the iPad inside. I moved Brock's gifts from the hallway into the living room and sat down beside them on the floor. Taking a deep breath, I reached for one of the boxes and held it on my lap for a moment. *If I open this, I'm opening my heart to the possibility of Brock again. I'm giving him a chance to hurt me again.*

What am I so afraid of?

That he'll treat me the way Wayne did?

Wayne never cared enough about me to do anything as crazy as pretend to be a naughty elf. Brock is not Wayne. I have to stop comparing the two.

Brock says his proof is in these presents.

Please let him love me the way he says he does. Please don't let me be wrong twice.

I tore the paper off the first present and smiled at the simplicity of its contents. It was just a small pocket calendar with a puppy decorating the cover. Unthreatening. Sweet. I opened the calendar to the first page and read the message he had written there. "When you decide you're ready to see me, please check the calendar for dates when I'll be available." She flipped through the pages and saw that he had highlighted every evening and every weekend. On each day he'd written the same word: "Available."

Corny. Cute.

I reached for the next package. Wedged between two pieces of cardboard was an old, tattered piece of construction paper. I took it out and held it up, and tears started running down my cheeks. It was a drawing I'd made of the two of us back when, as children, we had spent the summer together while his father had worked on my mother's house. I'd drawn us holding hands and smiling and had written:

Keep this so you won't forget me. Your friend, Kate.

And he'd kept it, for about twenty years. I laughed as I wiped away tears. What man holds onto a crayon picture for twenty years?

Brock.

The next package contained a framed photo of us and his family at Christmas. I was beaming up at him, hugging him as we all posed while Aunt Stella repeatedly tried to figure out how to take a photo with a phone. She'd gotten confused so many times that by the time this particular photo had been

taken, everyone in the picture was laughing. Even Brock's father, who had a hand up in the air as he called out instructions to Stella. On the back of the frame, Brock had written, "This is where you belong. With us. Please, don't leave me here with them." I chuckled.

I ripped the wrapping off the next gift and was intrigued by it. He'd given me a Kindle. I read the note attached to it twice. "Where do I want to go with you? Everywhere. Anywhere. Look over the travel books I've downloaded. Pick a place, and that's where I'll take you. I don't care where we are, as long as we're together."

There was a time when I would have dismissed Brock's notes as just words that meant nothing more than a desire to change my mind. However, those words, when sent along with the other gifts, rang true. He wasn't showboating. He really would go anywhere with me.

The next box held a gift certificate for dance classes and a note that read, "Because you love to dance, and I don't think you let yourself do it enough."

As for the box, if my heart hadn't already melted completely, its contents would have done it. In fact, had it been the only gift he'd given me, it would have been enough. It was a written apology from the man I'd dated in high school, the one with the sweaty hands who had chased me around town and earned me the nickname Untouchable Kate. He said he had no real excuse for his behavior back then outside of being young and stupid. He explained he was married with a daughter now, and he finally understood how wrong he had been. He said Brock had demanded he write the letter, but he should have written it a long time ago.

Brock had hunted down the man who had humiliated me in high school and had gotten the apology I'd never dared demand for myself. There was no denying anymore that Brock loved me.

I went to the kitchen and retrieved the last present I'd received from Mr. Elf. I opened the box and cocked my head

to one side as I read the product name. Mini nipple suckers? They were tiny, pink rubber thimbles. There was no note. There didn't have to be. Had I opened it the day I'd received it, I would have texted Mr. Elf for instructions on how to use them. Instead, I read the description on the box. Use with lube during foreplay to make nipples more sensitive.

I placed the gift from Mr. Elf on top of the gifts from Brock. With Brock, I could have a sweet, caring partner during the day and a naughty, adventurous lover at night.

This isn't about Brock as much as it's about me. I have to believe that he could love me.

Me.

Untouchable Kate.

The outcast. The trophy wife.

I could have what Angie has—a man I love who loves me back just as much—if I believe. I looked at the nipple suckers and smiled. Even at his worst, Brock had still been the best thing that had ever happened to me. Who would believe such a conservative-looking man could have so much kinkiness in him?

I grabbed my phone. I'd just realized I had a problem. "Angie, I'm going to dinner tomorrow night with Brock. What do I wear?"

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

This Devil Has Wings

Kate

THE NEXT NIGHT, dressed in my sexy new red dress, I sat nervously at a table in one of the most expensive restaurants in town. Brock had said he would be waiting there for me, but although a table had been reserved under his name, he was nowhere to be seen.

Had he changed his mind?

Should I have called to tell him I was coming?

I fiddled nervously with the small box I had brought with me. In it was the photo I'd found of Brock and me as children. Although it didn't compare to the gifts he'd given, I wanted to show him I'd also kept memories of him.

The waiter refilled my glass of water, and I thanked him. I caught a woman at a nearby table looking over at me sympathetically, probably wondering, just as I was, if I had been stood up on Valentine's Day. I met her eyes briefly, then looked away.

Love is a leap of faith, and I'm jumping in with both feet. Brock loves me. He'll be here. And if he doesn't come, it won't shake my love for him or my belief that he loves me. He may have been held up at work. He may have thought I wouldn't come and stayed home.

Our relationship is so much more than one event, one secret. I see that now, and I'm ready to tell him that.

I checked my phone. No messages.

As I looked around the room, I realized how much being with Brock had changed me. Before him, I would have been

mortified by the way people were staring at me. Now I didn't care. Let them look. They don't know me. They don't know how wonderful Brock is. What they think of me no longer matters.

Thank you, Mr. Elf, for that confidence.

And Brock . . . sensitive, loving Brock . . . thank you for loving me no matter how many times I pushed you away. I'm sorry I was so stubborn. I'll make it up to you.

Just show up.

Please.

A low chatter spread through the restaurant. I looked up from the table and saw Brock, dressed in a ridiculously large set of white feathered angel wings and a jaw-droppingly small white loincloth. The maître d' was blocking his entrance, but Brock met my eyes over the man's shoulder and winked at me. He said something to the man, gave him what must have been a substantial tip, and walked around him.

The restaurant fell silent. Brock was a good-looking man in regular clothing, but dressed as he was, he was H-O-T hot. His wide muscular shoulders were accentuated by the heavenly wings. His perfect abs and toned legs belonged on a gladiator. And that loincloth . . . it hid just enough to be decent, but was small enough that I wondered if every woman in the restaurant was thinking the same thing I was: *Holy hell, I want to tear that off with my teeth and then lick him from one end to the other.*

A few of the men mocked him as he walked by, but he didn't acknowledge them. He never took his eyes off me as he walked up to the table where I sat.

A man at the next table said, "Can you believe that guy? What a joke."

The woman across from him slapped his arm and said, "Shut up. That's the most romantic thing I've ever seen."

Brock stood in front of me, those wild white wings boldly flanking him on either side. “Kate Hale, I love you.”

I looked around and blushed. “You’re a little crazy, you know that? Nothing embarrasses you, does it?”

He pulled me up into his arms. “Let them look. You’re the only one here who matters to me. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you. No amount of time I wouldn’t wait for you. Say you forgive me.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, really?” a man asked loudly.

A woman near him said just as loudly, “If you don’t want him, I’ll take him.”

“Hey, you’re with me,” another man said.

“Exactly,” the woman snapped. “When have you ever done anything like that for me?”

“Why would I? That guy is—”

“A dream come true, if you ask me. And she is one lucky woman.”

I pulled Brock down and murmured against his lips, “I am, you know. Very lucky. I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but yes, I forgive you. And I’m sorry for everything. I love you, Brock.”

“Excuse me, sir? You’re going to have to leave now,” the maître d’ said.

Brock kissed me softly on the lips and said, “That’s okay, because I think everything we want to do can’t be done here.”

I laughed. “You’ve got that right, Cupid.”

Hand in hand, we walked out of the restaurant, laughing with the same uninhibited joy we’d shared as children. Once out of the building, Brock kissed me soundly and swung me around. I felt lighter than air and happier than I could ever remember being.

When he stopped spinning, he hugged me and asked, “Did you know there is a hotel across the street?”

I laughed. “And you just happen to have a room reserved there?”

Brock laughed with me. “I thought it would be a shame to waste this outfit. If you’ve ever wanted to be with Cupid, here’s your chance.”

In the light of the moon, Brock looked very much like a gorgeous fallen angel. “Is he anything like an elf?”

Brock swung me into his arms and walked across the street, not caring that cars slowed and honked as we passed. “He’s even better. You should see his arrow.”

I groaned at his joke, but that didn’t faze Brock in the least. He carried me through the foyer of the hotel and into one of the elevators as if it were the most normal thing to do. Some men would have been embarrassed by the way people stopped and stared at them. Others might have strutted around like peacocks, enjoying the attention.

Brock did neither. His attention was focused on me, and that made him even sexier. I couldn’t keep my hands off him. He was a dream come true—my dream.

Inside the elevator, I waved my purse. “I hope Cupid knows what to do with nipple suckers, because they look like fun.”

Brock’s eyes darkened, and I felt him harden against my side. “What Cupid doesn’t know, he enjoys figuring out.”

Just outside the hotel suite, Brock lowered me to my feet. “I meant every word I said in the restaurant. I love you, Kate. And if you let me, I’ll spend the rest of my life proving it to you.”

I took his face between both of my hands and said, “You don’t have to prove anything to me anymore, Brock. I believe you. And I’m so sorry it took me this long to figure that out.”

A serious expression crossed Brock's face. He put a hand on the doorknob and said, "What you're about to see is a little over the top. I know it. If you don't like it, say so. But I wanted tonight to be special, and the guys helped me decorate the suite."

I almost laughed at how concerned he looked. "What did you put in there?" He swung the door open. I stepped inside and fell even more in love with him. Everywhere I looked shouted Valentine's Day. There were red flower petals leading to the bed. The bedspread was covered with hearts. Next to the bed was a heart-shaped swing suspended from some rigging. Champagne. Chocolate. Flowers. It was all there, and in such abundance that I turned and threw my arms around Brock's neck and pulled him down for a wild kiss.

"You like it?" he asked.

"I love it," I said between kisses. "And I love you. This is amazing."

He plucked a feather from one of his wings and said, "It only gets better, Kate." He ran the feather lightly down one side of my neck and across the swell of one breast. "Feathers aren't just for flying, you know."

I looked behind him and said, "I'm guessing that swing isn't just for swinging, either." Then I cleared my throat. "Brock, I didn't mean what I said about vanilla sex being boring. It was beautiful. Just like how the other stuff we did wasn't too much. I was angry with you and I wanted to hurt you. I was wrong. I'm sorry."

He hugged me to his chest. "I deserved it. I never meant for my stint as Mr. Elf to go as far as it did. I was an idiot and thought I could use what we were doing in the texts to make you fall for me. It was stupid, and I should have told you the truth when we started dating. Let's put all that behind us." He leaned down and growled in my ear, "Except for having me wear women's perfume. You owe me for that one."

I smiled mischievously at him. “That was bad of me, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was. You’ll have to think of a way to make it up to me,” he said, and wiggled his eyebrows.

I whispered in his ear, “What do you want, Cupid?”

Brock looked seriously into my eyes. “You. Just you, Kate.”

I dropped my dress to the floor. “Nothing more specific than that?”

A grin spread across his face. “Well, now that you ask . . .” He swooped down, lifted me into his arms, and carried me off to the bedroom. He removed his loincloth but left the wings on, and gave me a feather-flying night to remember.

EPILOGUE

Kate

“DO YOU THINK Mike would watch the boys on Thursday nights?” I asked Angie while walking with her one evening the following week.

“Maybe. Why?”

I tried to keep a straight face as I said, “Everyone has been talking about how Brock dressed up as Cupid for me.”

“I hear about it wherever I go.”

“Well, the radio office manager asked me if I wanted to do social media for them. Paid. He suggested we focus our content on relationships and how to make them work. I told him I’d only do it if you could do it with me. Would you?”

“Are you fucking serious?” Angie burst out.

I put a hand on one hip and teased my friend. “I *am* fucking serious. Come on, Angie, we could do this. You say you want something to think about outside of the boys. This is your chance. We can make the content from anywhere. This would be fun.”

Angie stopped pushing the stroller for a moment and said, “Let’s do it. Thanks to you, my marriage is a whole lot happier. Why couldn’t we help other people?”

“The manager suggested we start our show off with a bang. Something no one would expect and would get everyone talking. So, I was thinking, what if we took a single guy and tried to find him a love match?”

With a huge smile, Angie said, “Oh, my God, I know just who we should ask. Tyler. He is notorious for saying he’ll never settle down.”

“Would he do it?”

“He would if his friends pressured him to.”

I said confidently, “I could get Brock to ask him.”

Angie laughed. “Mike would definitely help. So we’re really doing this?”

“Oh, yeah.”

THE END

About the Author



Ruth Cardello was born the youngest of 11 children in a small city in southern Massachusetts. She spent her young adult years moving as far away as she could from her large extended family. She lived in Boston, Paris, Orlando, New York—then came full circle and moved back to New England. She now happily lives one town over from the one she was born in. For her, family trumped the warmer weather and international scene.

She was an educator for 20 years, the last 11 as a kindergarten teacher. When her school district began cutting jobs, Ruth turned a serious eye toward her second love—writing and has never been happier. When she's not writing, you can find her chasing her children around her small farm, riding her horses, or connecting with her readers online.

Contact Ruth:

Website: RuthCardello.com

Email: ruthcardello@gmail.com

FaceBook: [Author Ruth Cardello](#)

Twitter: [@RuthieCardello](#)