

*She's his only
Christmas
wish.*

CHRISTMAS

CRUSH
MINNK

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Christmas Crush
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Watching Ruby build a life away from Reindeer Valley hasn't been easy, but I had to let her spread her wings and find out what she really wants. I've known what I wanted from the moment I saw her in high school. But I was a jerk then, someone who didn't understand what love truly meant. Now I do.

And now it's time for Ruby to come home. Her grandmother's bakery has (quite mysteriously) been overwhelmed with holiday orders over the past week, and Grams needs help. There's only one person she can call to help, one person with the know-how to help make the mountain of Christmas cakes and cookies.

Ruby.

When she comes home, I'm going to show her how I've changed and how much she means to me. I only hope that will be enough to convince her to stay here with me in Reindeer Valley forever.

“Thanks for all the help.” Mrs. Lane gives me a warm smile.

“Anytime.” I adjust a few of the thermostat controls on the back of her convection oven before rolling it against the wall again.

Her bakery smells like cinnamon and vanilla, Christmas baking in full swing.

“There’s simply no way I can fill all my orders without that oven working. I need both full-time.” She wipes the back of her hand across her forehead, smearing some flour into her already-white hair. “And if I’m being honest, I still don’t know if I can get it all done before Christmas. The orders just won’t stop.”

“That’s not a bad thing.” I test the controls. They’re working fine. “Let’s see if it heats.”

“It’s not a bad thing.” She turns and looks at the stainless steel table in the middle of her bakery, every inch of it filled with cakes and cookies in various states of construction or icing. “But I think it’s finally time I hired someone on to help. The only problem is nobody has the skills I need. So much of this is taught.” She wrings her hands. “If I tried to train a new person, it would take me even longer to get everything finished.”

“Orders have picked up that much?”

“Knox.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know how, but I’m suddenly the busiest bakery in the world, it seems like. I’ve already filled 30 orders this

morning alone. Cakes, cookie, pastries—you name it.”

“Hmm, yeah, you do seem overwhelmed.”

“You don’t happen to know how to bake, do you?” she asks.

“Sorry, Mrs. Lane. I’m more of a metal and grease kind of guy.” I shrug.

“I know.” She leans against the counter. “You’re a lifesaver when my equipment breaks. I can’t ask for more. How’s your father? I heard he’s been ill.”

“He’s fine. Just banging around in that big old house and terrorizing the help every chance he gets. Same as always.” I check the oven once more. “It’s getting to temp properly now. You should be good to go.”

“Thanks so much. What do I owe you?” She follows me to the front of the shop.

“I’ll just put it on your tab.” I sidestep Olin as he walks to the counter to place a slew of new orders.

“Hi, Olin. I’ll be right with you. More orders?” she asks somewhat incredulously.

He nods. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, I’ll be with you in a second. Knox, you have to let me pay you something. My tab has to be huge by now. You’ve never charged me for—”

“No worries.” I wave her concern away. But before I push out the door, I pause.

Olin glances at me and waits.

I clear my throat. “Mrs. Lane?”

“Yes?” She digs behind the counter and pulls out a worn check register. “How much?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Not that. It’s just ...” My palms get sweaty, and I feel like I’m trying to kick a field goal to win a game. Not just any game, the biggest game of my life. “Wouldn’t it be great if you could get Ruby to come

help out? She knows how to bake.”

“She better. I taught her all my tricks.” She smiles. “I don’t know, Knox. She’s so busy with her job ever since she graduated college. She hasn’t even come to visit. It was like pulling teeth to get her home at all the past few years, what with her course load and everything. And now she’s in the big city.”

“I know. But surely she’ll get some time off for the holidays? You need help, and it seems to me like Ruby is the only one who can step in for you. Especially since you keep getting so many orders.” I gesture toward Olin.

“Twenty more.” He shrugs.

“Twenty cakes?” Mrs. Lane’s eyes widen. “For who? There’s no way you’re eating all this. Look at you. All muscle.”

Olin shrugs. “I have clients who love your cakes. What can I say?”

Mrs. Lane raises a brow but readies her pen to take his order.

I give Olin a brief nod before swinging the door open, the bell tinkling in the cold December air.

“You know what?” Mrs. Lane calls after me.

I turn, my breath coming out in steam as a snow flurry surrounds me. “Yes, ma’am?”

“You’re right. I’m going to call Ruby. She needs to come home. It’s been too long. And I know our little town isn’t the fast city life, but I need help.”

I smile and try to play off the way my heart leaps and my body heats. “She’ll come running if you say you need her. She’s a good girl, Mrs. Lane.”

“She is.” She nods and waves me away as I let the door close.

I stand there staring down the quaint Main Street of Reindeer Valley. A few cars pass as I wait, my heart still pounding as I think about Ruby finally coming home where she belongs.

The bell rings behind me, and Olin steps out.

I pull a list from my back pocket and hand it to him.

“More?” he asks.

“More.”

“What are we going to do with all these cookies?” He groans.

“Get to work.” I hitch a thumb over my shoulder and stride away, the snow swirling around a few cars as they pass. Olin goes back into the bakery, adding to his order. *My order.*

I smile as I pull my coat tighter around me and head for my mechanic shop. I have to get ready for Ruby, though I don't think she's ready for me. But once she's here, that's half the battle. All I have to do now is convince her to stay.

She was meant for Reindeer Valley. And more than that, she was meant for *me.*

“*R*uby, in my office.” Mr. Brooks orders as he passes by the front of my desk.

My stomach drops. I thought he was still out of town. I've been enjoying this week without him here. Well, enjoying it more than I normally do. This place is a bit more tolerable when he's out of the office and on one of his daddy's yachts trying to escape the cold of the city.

I don't blame him. There's something about winter in the city that doesn't work for me. Back home in Reindeer Valley it's much different. I actually love the winters there. The smell of snow is always in the air. As well as the sweet scent of my grandma's baked goods. Whenever you step outside, it's a reminder that the holidays are closing in. Just thinking about it makes me a bit homesick.

“Ruby!” Mr. Brooks barks my name this time. I jump from my seat and scurry after him. He holds the door to his office open for me, closing it the second I cross over the threshold. “How is ‘*The Dog Whisperer*’ campaign going?” He motions for me to take one of the chairs in front of his desk.

“I sent you over the final drafts last night. If Mr. Barks and you are happy with the changes I made at his request, then we should be good to go.”

I am so ready to be done with this campaign. It's actually the first one I've done all on my own. It's more challenging for me than some of the others I've worked on since I've been at Marcel Marketing. I'm not really a dog

person. They can be cute and all, but nothing beats kittens, and no one will ever convince me otherwise.

“Right. Everything is great.” He leans up against his desk in front of me, stretching his legs all the way out until they are brushing against mine. I pull my legs back, tucking my ankles together.

He smiles. “The holiday party. I was thinking we should go together. You’re going, right?”

I stare at him, thinking I heard him wrong, but I know I haven’t. He’s been low-key flirting with me for awhile now. At least I think he has been. I’m not the only one he’s been doing it to either. A few of the other women in the office have mentioned his come-ons and inappropriate comments. They didn’t mince words when talking about it.

“I’ll be going. Isn’t everyone?”

I actually hadn’t planned on going at all. The truth is, I don’t care much for anyone here. Coming from a small town, I thought everyone would be the same way they are back home: warm and welcoming. Yes, it’s silly. No, city people aren’t like that at all. It’s a completely different vibe—one I’ve had trouble adjusting to even though I’ve doggedly refused to call it quits. I wanted the big city, and now I have it. I shouldn’t be daydreaming about what life is like back in my sleepy old hometown.

I was supposed to move away and have all these experiences. I thought I would have a different life, but at each turn, everything falls flat and has me missing home. The city is bright and has some great parts to it, but I don’t like how cutthroat people can be. Even when you try to be friendly with someone, they’re skeptical and think you are trying to steal one of their ideas or something.

I thought everyone was crazy and way too paranoid at first. We all work for the same company. I thought we were all on a team. That was until I’d gotten a handful of my own ideas stolen right out from under me. Even Mr. Brooks had the audacity to steal one and presented it as his own.

I wasn’t super pissed about it. I was more annoyed that we all couldn’t just be a freaking team. That we couldn’t brainstorm together and share ideas. But I

quickly realized that was never going to be the case.

“You’ll be my date,” he continues, not really asking anymore. “You mentioned that you’re not going home for the holidays, so you’ll spend them with me.”

I can’t tell if I’m having an aneurysm or if he really just said he wants me to spend my free time with him. Of all people. This guy. Gross. I open my mouth, but no words come out.

“We’re going to make a few changes though. I’m not a fan of your suits. Do you wear them to cover the extra weight?”

“What?” I squeak out.

I’ve always been on the curvy side. My grandma owns a freaking bakery that I was pretty much raised inside of. If anything, I’d lost a bit of weight when I left for college. Not that I was trying to. It was the lack of my grandma’s home cooking and her sweet treats that did it. But Mr. Brooks is right about one thing. I do wear suits to hide my body to a point. I thought by wearing them I’d be taken seriously, but here I am with my boss hitting on me.

“You have nice curves. You shouldn’t hide them.” He openly runs his gaze over my body. I want to fall into a hole, and then he goes and licks his crusty lips.

“You’re my boss.”

“It’s fine. You’ll just need to sign some papers for HR first so there won’t be any issues.”

I shake my head. Maybe he’s the one with the aneurysm if he thinks I’m signing anything from HR.

“As you pointed out, Ruby, I’m your boss. You don’t get to tell me no.” He stares down at me. “Understood?”

“Yes,” I agree because I’m the world’s worst person when it comes to confrontation. I should be telling him to drop dead or something. Instead, all I can think about is saying whatever I need to to get out of his office as quickly as I can.

“Good, you may go,” he dismisses me.

I stand and hurry away. It’s what I do best, after all. Run. Though that hasn’t been working for me lately. Not sure it ever really has.

I can feel his eyes on me the whole way. A few of the women in the office glare at me when they see me leave Mr. Brooks’ office. My stomach turns. I know I’m going to make myself sick over this. When I sit down at my desk, I check my phone and smile when I see I have a few missed calls from my grandma. I miss her so much.

When I’d gone off to college, I’d picked marketing in hopes that maybe one day I could help her bakery grow, but she seems to be doing fine without me. She has never once even asked me for any tips.

My phone vibrates in my hand, a text coming through. I’m surprised to see it’s Grandma texting me. She never texts. I wasn’t even sure she knew how.

Grams: Come home

I swear, somehow she always tells me what I need to hear even when I’m not asking her. I can’t argue with an order from my grandma. At least this time when I run, I have an excuse.

S seal up the last box of sweet treats and add a large sticker with Mrs. Lane’s bakery logo on it. “Send this one to the old folks home two towns over. I think there’s a big one in Carrington Village. They’ll appreciate all the sugar.”

Olin loads the box into the back of his delivery van. I’d purchased it just for this enterprise. After all, I couldn’t have the bakery goods being dropped off by someone in a fancy Porsche or even a Tesla. That would raise questions.

“Once you’re done dropping off, head back and see if Mrs. Lane has any more orders filled. If she does, hit up the fire department—”

“Already did.”

“How about the sewing shop on Third and Chestnut? It’s full of moms and grandmas this time of year. Drop some cookies off with them.”

“Fine.” He closes the back of the van, then leans against it. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

“Definitely.”

“Okay, here’s a crazy thought—” He holds his hands up, palms toward me. “Just go with me here, all right? What if—instead of ordering all these bakery treats—you just call up Ruby and tell her you—”

“No.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Why not?”

“We’ve already discussed this.” I glance up at the darkening sky. “You should get going. More snow is in the forecast.”

“I just think that you could—”

“Thanks, Olin.” I turn my back on him and stride into my shop.

Greasy is sitting on top of the TransAm I work on from time to time. Mainly when I’m frustrated. It’s one of my father’s old cars. He’d gotten a wild hair back in the eighties and bought several American muscle and sports cars. The TransAm is the only one that survived.

“This is going to work.” I pet Greasy between his fuzzy ears. His black fur is shiny, almost slick. Hence his name. It also doesn’t hurt that he hangs around my garage. Plenty of grease here to make his nickname fit.

He butts his head against my knuckles, a light purr in his throat.

“She’s going to come back, and then I’ll have the chance to do what I should’ve done years ago. Easy, right?”

He gives me a love nip on the side of my wrist just as my phone starts buzzing. “I swear if this is Olin complaining again ...” I glance at my screen. It’s my father calling.

“Yes?” I answer it.

“Have you seen my pipe?” he asks.

“Pipe?”

“The one with the gold lady on the round part like the figurehead on a big old whaling ship?”

I blink. Has he finally gone completely insane? “What?”

“A pipe!” he shouts. “For tobacco and whatnot. I need a smoke. A man’s smoke. Not some namby-pamby cigarette in some silly wrapper with a filter. No, a *heavy* smoke!”

“I have no idea. Did you ask Mr. Finley?”

“Who?”

I try to keep my patience, but he makes it so hard sometimes. “Your assistant.”

“An assistant?” He guffaws. “Abner T. Lovejoy doesn’t need an assistant!”

“Dad, when you talk about yourself in third person, it makes me worry.”

“Aw, shut it. I’ll find it myself. Need a smoke. Need it now!” He ends the call.

I stare at my phone and shake my head. He really does get crazier by the minute.

“I guess I need to go check on him.” I give Greasy a few more pets before grabbing a box of cookies from the stash we’ve created at the shop. My workers take goodies home for the families every day. “Maybe the sugar will sweeten the old man up.”

The drive up to the mansion on the hill surrounded by snow-dusted trees doesn’t take long. The Lovejoy Manor has maintained its place looking down on Reindeer Valley for over a century.

When I enter, Dad is tearing through his office and yelling at poor Mr. Finley. “It’s got breasts on the front, young man. Great big ones! You puff on the mouthpiece, of course, not the breasts. But the breasts are nonetheless very important. It’s like art! It *is* art. I need it!”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I haven’t seen any such ... item ... at all.”

When I enter the office, Mr. Finley half-heartedly searches along a bookcase as Dad pulls drawers from his desk.

“What’s the big deal with the pipe?” I place the box of cookies on the corner of his desk.

Dad narrows his eyes, his gray hair thick and in disarray.

“Is that ... what’s that? Some cookies?” he asks.

“Yes, from the bakery.”

“Lorraine’s bakery?” He leans over and opens the box.

“Yes. She asked about you, by the way.”

“She did?” He grabs a cookie that’s shaped like a Christmas tree and covered in green sprinkles. “Lorraine. When we were young, the figure on her—it was like ... Like a dream. Her ass—you could set a drink on it. And she was so funny. Smart. Everything, really.” His eyes get dreamy. “But of course she wasn’t from a good family. Just nobodies, really.” He coughs. “Not meant for me. Your mother... Yes, your mother was more suitable. With a good pedigree, or so my father said. . .” He pauses, lost in thought, but then he seems to remember himself. “Yes, your mother was far more suitable.”

I certainly don’t have time to get into the many, many ways my mom was absolutely *unsuitable* as a wife and a mother, so I try to focus on the one thing I can fix. “Why do you want a pipe?” I glance around at the mess he’s made.

“A pipe?” He munches the cookie and almost smiles, his eyes still dreamy as he likely pictures younger Lorraine’s rear shelf. “What pipe? Who wants a pipe? Didn’t Dr. Sunderland say I’m not supposed to smoke anymore? Not that I did it much. Your mother hated the smell. And I did anything I could to keep her from snapping at me.” He makes a face but takes another bite of the cookie and almost smiles again. “And you shouldn’t smoke, son. It’s a terrible habit. It’s bad enough that you became a mechanic, of all things. Opened a shop and everything. You could’ve been someone important, someone famous. Like Bobby Kennedy—but alive, of course. That’s important.” He munches thoughtfully. “Right, being a mechanic is one thing, but smoking is simply one bridge too far. I have to put my foot down on this one.”

Mr. Finley groans and starts setting the room back to order.

“Glad we got that straightened out.” I don’t roll my eyes, but I certainly think about it. “If you’re all set here, I have some work to do at the shop.” Not entirely true—my work has more to do with Ruby than anything. I want to know if my plan is working, and more importantly, I want to know the second she steps foot into town.

“Fine. I don’t know why you came up here to begin with. I never see you anymore. You really should take more of an interest in the estate since you’ll be inheriting it. You need to find a good match like I did. Then settle down here and, and, and ... and do whatever it is we do. Yes? Yes.” He nods to himself.

“Right.” I pull him in for a brief hug and ignore the sprinkles he leaves on my shoulder. “I’ll see you in a few days unless you need me. Sound good?”

“I’m fine.” He waves me away and reaches for another cookie. “I’ve got young Finley here to do my bidding.”

“Young Finley” is sixty if he’s a day, but there’s no point reminding my father of that.

Mr. Finley gives me a kind, long-suffering smile as I back out of the office.

I hurry back to my car so I can return to town. Keeping an eye on the bakery is a full-time job. It’s a good thing I own the entire block right across the street. Now all I have to do is hunker down and wait for Ruby to show up.

Once she’s here, she’s mine.

Luckily, the flight home was short. I'd barely made it to the airport in time to even catch my plane. But I was able to get on, and that's all that matters. The last thing I needed was to linger around and change my mind about coming home. Plus, I know if I really had time to think about the consequences of my decision, I might not go.

There's no turning back now, even though this most likely will get me fired. I really had no choice in the matter. What was I supposed to do? Leave my grandmother high and dry when she needs me? This has nothing to do with the longing I've had to come back home for a few years now. That's what I tell myself, anyway.

I pull out my phone to call Grams to let her know I've landed, but it goes straight to voicemail. The heck? Then I see a text from her. What is up with her texting all the sudden?

Grams: I'm sending someone to pick you up.

Dang. She really must be slammed if she can't even come to pick me up. I fire a text back asking her who she sent before I make my way to the exit.

There's another message, but I don't bother opening the text from my roommate. She always has something to complain about. When I told her about me heading out of town at the last second, she even complained about that. I thought she'd be happy that I wasn't going to be there for a while. Then again, who's going to clean up after her? She has a built-in maid. I've

tried to let her messiness go, but I can't. She leaves her crap everywhere. Our place isn't giant, so I don't have much of a choice but to clean up after her. It's going to be a vacation in itself being away from her.

I suck in a breath when the cold air hits me. Sometimes I forget how cold it can actually get here. I don't hate it. I just didn't keep that in mind when I left for the airport. I was in such a hurry that I forgot my winter coat altogether.

When Grams doesn't text me back, I glance around to see who she might have sent. My heart stops when I catch sight of Knox. I quickly look away. I'm not even in Reindeer Valley yet, and I'm already running into him! Why the heck is the universe so cruel? He's the main reason I never come home to begin with. Not that I would ever in my life admit that out loud to anyone.

I turn to give him my back, knowing he likely won't recognize me. He barely gave me the time of day in high school. He'd been a few grades above me and ran with the rich crowd. All the girls loved him, and all the boys wanted to be him. I hated that I had also fallen into that category. There was always something about Knox that drew my eyes to him no matter how hard I tried to look away.

Then he'd gone and broken my heart. I hadn't even realized how in love with him I was back then. Not until I'd overheard him speaking badly about me. His words had crushed me. It hadn't helped that a few days prior he'd actually been kind to me. I had this small flame of hope that he might like me, too.

I was a silly girl then. I might still be, because it's taking everything inside of me to not turn back around and take another glance at him for old time's sake. He's bigger than I remember. The years have been good to him. I didn't think it was possible for him to be any handsomer than he was in high school, but I was wrong.

It doesn't matter. If I'm lucky, I won't run into him again. Once he picks up whoever he's waiting for—I ignore the twinge of jealousy that ignites at the thought of him waiting for a girlfriend or, even worse, a wife—he'll be gone, and then I can find my ride. Problem solved.

"Ruby Lane." My stomach plummets at the familiar deep voice. I try to convince myself that he didn't just say my name. I don't turn around. Maybe

if I ignore him, he'll go away. I pretend to be seriously invested in my phone.

"Red," he calls again. This time his voice is closer than before. I can actually feel him come up behind me.

"What's so interesting on your phone?" he asks. Before I know what's happening, he has it in his hand.

"Hey!" I spin around and try to grab it back from him.

I jump for it, but it's pointless. He holds it up over his head where I'll never reach it in a million years. Not that I don't still try. I probably look like an idiot.

"Where is your coat?" He glares down at me.

Of course the first time I run into him I look like crap. I'm in sweats and sneakers. My hair is piled on top of my head, and I don't have a speck of makeup on my face. He looks as handsome as ever, but something is different. His hair is a bit unruly, and I don't think he's shaved today. In high school, he was always so put together all the time. Of *course* he's more handsome this way. It's a bunch of bullcrap that he doesn't even have to try to look good.

"I have a sweater on." I make another jump for my phone when it starts to ring in his hand.

"You need a coat."

"Give me my phone." I hold my hand out.

"Why? I was rather enjoying you jumping up and down against me." He smirks.

I gape at him. He did not say that. Nope. Didn't say it. I'm clearly hallucinating from the cold. But what if he did? I'm not just some dope who's going to fall for his stupid charm. "Don't you have enough girls trying to jump all over you?"

"None that I want."

"Right," I grit out. How could I forget?

Knox was always too good for any of the girls from Reindeer Valley. None of them met the standards he'd set. I think that's partly why the girls in school were always throwing themselves at him. They wanted to be the ones to claim they'd gotten Knox into bed. Oddly, he wasn't a manwhore. At least not around here. There was always talk in high school that he only slept with college girls. I have no clue if that was true. Not that I care. Because I definitely don't.

"Your boss is calling," Knox says before he clears the call. How the heck does he even know it's my boss? He hands me the phone back.

"It was nice seeing you," I say dryly before I turn back around, giving him my back.

"You sound like you haven't missed me," he responds as he takes my roller right out of my hand and begins to take off with it.

"What are you doing?" I have no choice but to chase after him. Before I can even get to his fancy sports car, he's already putting my suitcase into the back.

"Your grandma sent me to pick you up." He opens the passenger side door. "Get in. It's warm."

Grandma sent him? *Et tu, Lorraine?* I sputter.

"You're freezing out here. Come on." He gives me that same smile that used to melt my heart and do inappropriate things to my panties. Not that I think about it. Ever.

"Fine," I growl before I stomp over and get inside his vehicle. He shuts the door behind me before jogging around the front and jumping into the driver's seat. It's an hour drive to get to Reindeer Valley.

My breath hitches when he leans over me. "What are you doing?" I squeak out.

"Seatbelt, Red." The click of the buckle is loud in the car. "You clearly need someone to look out for you." He smirks.

I can't stop the sound of annoyance that comes from me. It only makes his smirk deeper and sexier.

This is going to be the longest hour of my life.

Merry freakin' Christmas to me.

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She's just like I remember her down to the last strand of hair. And her scent—it's the same.

"Are you sure you're supposed to be picking me up?" She shifts in her seat, her body facing me more, as if this is some sort of confrontation.

I don't mind. It just gives me a better view of her. She has no idea how much self-control it took for me not to kiss her the moment I saw her. "I'm sure. Lorraine has her hands full at the bakery, so I offered to pick you up and save her the time."

"Why?" One of her eyebrows arches.

I remember that look. But somehow it's sexier now. All grown up.

"She has a lot of orders." I shrug as I pull out onto the main highway leading to Reindeer Valley.

"Not 'why couldn't she come,' more like 'why would you ever volunteer to waste your time with a lowly little peasant like me?'" Her tone is almost cutting, but she's still too sweet to really draw blood.

"Peasant?" I laugh. "It's that the sort of talk they teach you in the city?"

She rolls her eyes. Adorable. "Just answer the question."

"I wanted to see you." That's the damn truth and then some. Spying on her in the city was acute torture. Being close enough to touch her but having to sit

back and wait—I honestly don't know how I did it. But I wanted to give her time to find herself, to discover on her own that she belongs here with me. Of course, I can admit I may have given her a little nudge ...

“You wanted to see me?” She blows a raspberry. “Lies.”

“Is that so hard to believe?” I pass a slow-moving truck laden with freshly-cut Christmas trees as a light snow shower falls all around.

“Yes.” She turns and looks out the window as the airport town falls away and the scenery becomes more forested.

“It's the truth, Ruby.” I reach out to take her hand, but she wiggles in her seat and clasps her fingers together, her gaze still on the snowy woods.

“Sure, Knox.” She doesn't sound the least bit convinced. “Whatever you say.”

I frown, unsure of how to convince her, but I counsel myself to be more patient. After all, she just got back.

“One thing's for sure.” She sighs. “I've missed this. The way the air is so crisp, the snowy woods, everything that feels like home.”

“The city not living up to expectations?”

“It's fine,” she replies quickly. Too quickly. And I don't miss the furtive glance she sends my way.

“Just 'fine'?”

She wrinkles her nose. “It's not really your business, is it?”

Everything to do with her is my business, but I don't want to push. Not yet, anyway.

“Grams told me you never left the Valley.” She cuts me a sly look. “But I guess you wouldn't have to go anywhere. I mean, you're already king of the town. You've got your mansion up on the hill where you can lord it over the rest of us. Must be nice to have everything laid out for you like a little prince.”

Shots fired. “I get it.” I shrug. “My family has a reputation, and I let that go to my head when I was younger. They had me later in life, and I guess that meant they were already set in their ways and their opinions. My mother was a big fan of telling me how superior I was to everyone else in town. And I believed her for a while. I really did.”

“I ...” She finally looks at me again, compassion in her eyes. “I heard about your mom’s passing. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks.” I meet her gaze for a moment before returning to the road. “That’s kind of you. She wasn’t an easy woman to love, but she was my mom. I’ve still got Dad raising hell up at the house. I visit as much as I can.”

“Oh.” She looks ahead as we crest a hill and Reindeer Valley comes into view. “You don’t live up there?”

“Nah. I moved out and got a nice little cottage off Main Street. I updated it, but it’s still cozy. And the best part is, I can walk to the shop.”

“You really work as a mechanic?” Her eyebrow lifts again, skepticism written all over her.

“Yep.”

“You. Prom king. Valedictorian. Ivy League material. Instead of heading to Harvard, you grabbed a wrench? I really can’t picture it.” Her gaze strays to one of my hands on the steering wheel.

“All true. Here.” I reach out and take her hand. Just touching her sends a singing jolt of heat through my blood.

She swallows hard. “What are you—“

“Feel my palm.” I open my hand, and she runs her small fingers along my skin. Each touch is like a little lick of fire. Even though I try to keep myself calm, I wonder if she can hear my raging heartbeat.

“Calluses.” She feels the spots along my fingers hardened from the touch of a wrench. “You really do the work, don’t you? I’m surprised and sort of ... I feel sort of...” She puts her palm to mine, now comparing hand sizes. Mine dwarfs hers. When she moves her fingers higher, straying to my wrist, I fight

the urge to slam on the brakes and pull her against me.

“You feel sort of what?” I ask.

It seems to break her out of her reverie, and when she pulls her hands away, I silently curse myself for speaking.

“Nothing.” She faces forward and folds her hands in her lap. “I feel nothing at all.”

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The questions never end. Knox asks me one after another as we make our way to town. He's acting like I have the most interesting life and he wants to know all about it. Back in school we barely talked.

Hell, he didn't really talk to anyone that wasn't in his circle, but now he won't shut up. Worse, I find myself enjoying his attention way more than I should be. I should know better.

"Is your boss going to be pissed that I cleared his call?" He smirks as he asks this question.

"He's already pissed so what does it matter?" I shrug it off.

"Because you took some time off? Everyone is entitled to have some time off."

"Something like that." I sigh. My eyes once again linger on Knox's hands on the steering wheel. God, the way his palm felt against mine—I want to feel it again. It's such a weird thing to want, but something about his rough hands made him even sexier than he already is. I didn't think Knox Lovejoy could get more attractive than he already was, but damn was I wrong.

"Tell me."

"Tell you what?" I pretend to be confused. I really don't want to talk about my boss's unsolicited advances with my old high school crush/enemy/hottie.

“He did something.” It’s not a question, and I can almost feel him go tense beside me.

I try to relax, realizing I’d frozen up when he asked about my boss.

“Tell me.” His words come out seeming a bit like a growl. That same sweet thrill I’d felt when I touched his palm rolls through my body at the sound. I’m obviously going to have to give him an answer, because it doesn’t seem as though he’s going to let this go without one.

“He was being pushy about me going to the company Christmas party with him.”

“As a fuckin’ date?”

“Yeah, it was up there with the worst conversations of my life. He even asked me at the same time he poked at my weight.” As soon as the words slip off my tongue, I want to snatch them back. Why did I add all that? A simple yeah would have been satisfactory. Knox’s grip on the steering wheel tightens, his knuckles turning white.

“That—”

“I mean, I’m not sure if he was insulting me or complimenting me.” I cut him off.

“Don’t defend him.” He chews the words and spits them out like broken glass.

“Oh, sugar cookies!” It’s my Grams’ favorite curse, and here I am using it. I need to stop speaking, because yes, I did in a way defend my boss, but that wasn’t what I was trying to do. I just didn’t want to have some awkward conversation about my weight with Knox. I don’t need empty compliments. In fact, I don’t want to talk about my body at all with Knox, period. The man has always been ripped. He might not be playing sports like he did back in high school, but it’s clear he’s still hitting the gym. I can see that even with his coat on.

“I’ll handle it,” he mutters, the car growing quiet for the first time since I’d gotten in.

“I can handle myself just fine.” I kick my chin up, though I fail to mention that I handled it by running away. Back home. Besides, how the heck is he going to handle it? What does that even mean? I don’t bother to ask, not wanting to go back to the conversation. It’s better to leave it be.

“I’m sorry,” he says when we finally hit the giant welcome sign to Reindeer Valley. It’s lit up like a Christmas tree. It always is no matter what time of year. He releases his death grip on the steering wheel to place one of his hands on top of mine, stopping me from wringing them together. “I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“It’s fine really.” I can’t decide if I should pull my hands away, shove his hand off, or just stare down at where he’s touching me.

“It’s not, but it will be.” He takes his eyes off the road for a moment to meet mine.

For a second I’m transported back to my freshman year of high school. It was the first time I’d really noticed Knox. I’d run right into him in the hallway. I’d almost busted my booty on my first day, but he’d caught me and saved me from the embarrassment. Not only had he caught me, but he’d pulled me tight against him. Touching him like that—being held by him—gave me so many feelings I’d never had before. Like it short-circuited my brain.

Sometimes, though, I think I’ve made that moment up in my head. I recall his hold tightening on me as he stared into my eyes for a very long moment before his gaze dropped to my mouth. I’d been so sure he was going to kiss me.

Until Nora Mcguire butted her fake nose into our business. She of course took a shot at me and had poked at my weight. She’d been a senior at the time and was in love with Knox. Like every girl in town with eyes. I haven’t thought about Nora in years. Ugh. I can’t wait to run into her ass, too.

A weird sense of loss fills me when he puts his attention back on the road, but he leaves his hand over mine. I slowly pull my fingers from his. He shoots me a sideways look but lets his palm fall to my thigh. Well, I didn’t think that through, did I? My cheeks heat, and I can’t help but feel the warmth from his hand seeping through my leggings.

“Can you take me straight to the bakery?” I ask when he pulls onto Main Street. “I think Grams is going to need me to jump in to help right away.”

“I can take you anywhere you want.”

I actually don’t think there is anywhere else in the world I’d rather be right now than here. But I don’t say that. I shouldn’t even be thinking about it. I should be smacking the hand that is ever-so-slightly kneading my thigh.

In a desperate attempt to distract myself from this quandary, I move on to one of my favorite subjects—food. “I’m so going to need to go to the Snowrise Diner at some point. I need me some truffle cheese fries.”

“You can’t get those in the big city?”

“I can, but there is something about that fake truffle oil she puts in the cheese sauce you dip them in that no one else can beat,” I admit with a laugh. I think more than anything, whenever I tried to order truffle fries anywhere else, it only made me homesick.

“How about after I drop you off I run over and get you some?”

“Really?”

He pulls up to the front of the bakery.

“Yes, really.” He squeezes my thigh before he finally releases me. It’s foolish, but I want his hand back. And maybe ... maybe I want it in other places? *No! No, Ruby. Not happening. Especially not with Knox.*

He jumps out of the car, coming around and opening the passenger side door for me. Again, he offers me his hand. I take it. He pulls me out, but with a bit of force, causing me to slip forward right into him. “I’m not the same boy I was in high school, Ruby.”

“Clearly,” I breathe out, feeling every inch of him pressed against me. Knox is so far from being a boy, it’s laughable. Even in high school, he was more of a man. At least when it came to his appearance. Knox’s eyes drop to my mouth. I can’t help but lick my suddenly dry lips.

Everything inside me freezes when he starts to lean down. It’s happening. Knox Lovejoy is going to kiss me. I should shove him away. Tell him I

remember what he said about me all those years ago. That it doesn't matter if he's a changed man. That I don't want any part of him. Instead my eyes start to close, and I tilt my head back to give him easier access.

“Look who's back. I guess you finally realized you're not better than any of us.” I'd know that stuck-up voice anywhere. For a second, I think Nora is talking to Knox. He was the one always thinking he was better than everyone. Not that Nora has much room to talk in that category. She keeps on going, “I thought she was out of here like that mother of hers.”

I grit my teeth. Did my thoughts seriously conjure Nora up? I need to start thinking about baskets of kittens or something.

“Nora!” Knox barks, making both of us jump. Not that I get anywhere with how tightly Knox is holding me.

“Why are you snapping at me? We were supposed to be meeting up twenty minutes ago,” she huffs out.

I jerk my hand out from Knox's. Are they a thing now? Of course they are. Nora is as pretty as she was all those years ago. She and Knox could be Ken and Barbie. Scratch that, more like GI Joe and Barbie.

Anger fills me at the thought of them being together and also at myself for being so naïve. I don't care who you're doing favors for, it's not appropriate to go picking up someone from the airport if you've got another woman waiting for you. I know the thought is ridiculous, but I wouldn't want my man picking up a woman from anywhere. All buckling their seat belts and rubbing their palms on them. Great, now I think palm rubbing is erotic.

“I need to get to work. Thanks for the ride.” I practically run to the bakery, yanking the door open. “No fries!” I shout over my shoulder. It's a painful thing to have to say, but I do it. It's for the best.

Knox calls after me, but I ignore it. He's ignored me for years. I can do the same damn thing.

Ruby dashes into the bakery before I can say another word. When she calls out “no fries,” I want to curse Nora out. But I don’t. She’s annoying but harmless.

I walk back to my car. “Nora, I told you I don’t have room at the shop for your car today.”

She gives me a pouty face that I’m certain she’s practiced in the mirror. “I thought you could fit me in.”

“Not today. Besides, you came in for a tune-up last week, and Eddie told me everything is running fine.”

“But it’s making a noise.” She follows me to the car door and tries to lean against it.

I block her and pull it open. “Come by tomorrow afternoon. Eddie can take a look.”

“Will you be there?” She blinks, her lashes long and thick.

“Maybe.” I drop into the driver’s seat and make a mental note to stay far away from my shop tomorrow afternoon.

“I thought after you worked on my car, you and I could—”

“Gotta go, Nora.” I close my car door.

She leans over, trying to give me a view of her chest.

I start the car, the engine revving. Tapping my ear, I mouth that I can't hear her, then I pull away from the curb. Is it rude? Absolutely. Will it deter her? Not a chance. She's been after me since high school, though she doesn't want *me*, particularly. She's more interested in inheriting my father's estate and lording it over Reindeer Valley from the Lovejoy Estate. No, thanks.

Snowrise Diner is only a five-minute drive, and I make it there in three. Every second I'm not with Ruby is a second wasted.

Doreen greets me as I walk in and stomp the snow off my shoes. It's not coming down heavy yet, but there's enough on the ground to be messy.

"What can I get you, Knox?" She smiles, her bright red lipstick never changing in all the years I've known her.

"Truffle fries. Double order."

"I didn't know you liked those." She calls the order to the back where Gino, her husband, gives a wave through the window.

"I do, but they aren't for me."

She rolls her eyes. "That buzzard Nora finally got to you, did she?"

"Nope, Ruby's back in town."

Her eyes glint as she leans over the counter. "Ruby Lane?"

"The very one." I give a nod to the regulars who are chatting down at the other side of the bar.

"I didn't know she was coming home. At least, Lorraine hasn't said anything. Then again, I haven't seen her in a while." That glint shines in her eyes again. "It seems she's been getting a lot of orders. A ridiculous amount, in fact. And she's overworked. I'm guessing she's called Ruby in for help. Am I warm?"

"Of course you are. That's why you're the big spoon." Gino hands me the fries, hot and fresh from the fryer.

She laughs and pokes him in the arm. "This is why I keep you in the kitchen. Telling our business."

He kisses her cheek and retreats.

“Thanks.” I drop a twenty on the bar and back away.

“Don’t think I can’t see what you’re up to.” She winks at me. “And I can tell you, this is going to be fun to watch. Go get her, Knox.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I back out into the cold wind and speed back over to the bakery.

When I walk in, the whole place smells like an explosion at a vanilla factory.

“—many orders are we talking? Holy crap, Grams!” Ruby yells from the back. “How are we going to get all this done before Christmas?”

“That’s why you’re here. You’re my little elf. Helping me out with getting everything finished.” She laughs.

I put the fries on the counter and listen. It’s so good just to hear Ruby’s voice. Warm and sweet, just like her. She’s suspicious of me. I get that. But I’ll show her soon enough that I’m the man for her. The one who can make her happy and protect her—speaking of—I pull my phone from my pocket and send off a text to Mr. Finley. He responds almost instantly, and I tell him what I need. That’s all it takes to have a member of the Brotherhood pay a visit to Ruby’s boss.

Mr. Finley: Would you like him gone for good, sir? That’s the Brotherhood’s specialty, of course.

I hesitate. If it were only up to me, the bastard would be at the bottom of the ocean before the day was out. But I have to think about Ruby. She wouldn’t want him dead. So, instead, I opt for a less permanent option.

Knox: Have them scare him so badly he shits himself. He will never so much as look at Ruby Lane again. He won’t contact her, won’t say so much as ‘hello.’ If he does, the Brotherhood will be back. Pay the full contract price so it’s in place should I need to go through with it.

Mr. Finley: Very good, sir.

I pocket my phone as Lorraine and Ruby emerge from the back.

“Your room is... it’s ... being painted. Yes, painted.” Grams pats Ruby’s hand. “That’s the reason why you can’t stay at home.”

“Painted?” Ruby cocks her head to the side. “Why?”

“Well, you see ...” Lorraine wrings her hands, then looks up at me. “Oh, we have a customer! We’ll discuss this later, Ruby.”

I push the fries across the counter to her. Ruby takes one sniff and opens the top. She can’t help herself and grabs a fry, pressing it into her mouth before I can warn her they’re hot. But she doesn’t even mind. She chews and makes this sort of guttural sound that sends a jolt of need straight to my cock. I step closer to the counter to hide it, but damn, Ruby does it again with the next fry she eats.

“You’re staying with me,” I say.

“What?” Ruby seems to remember herself, but she doesn’t stop eating the fries. “No.”

“Yes. I have a cottage that’s only a few streets over. Nothing huge, but it’s got plenty of room for the both of us, and your luggage is still in my car anyway.”

Ruby winces. She must’ve forgotten all about it.

“Well, you, me, and Greasy. But he comes and goes according to his own schedule.”

“Greasy?” She licks the salt and truffle oil from her lips, her pink tongue drawing my gaze. She’s slowly torturing me. First the sounds, now the tongue.

“My cat.”

“You’re a cat person?” Ruby’s voice is tinged with surprise as she grabs another fry.

“I’m a Greasy person. He took up with me at the shop one day, and then he appeared on my doorstep. He follows me pretty much everywhere in this town. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s outside right now, watching me from across the street.”

“Wow.” Ruby gives me a half-smile. “He sounds like a keeper.”

“He is. And you can meet him tonight at my place.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t stay with you. That’s crazy.”

“You can.” Lorraine nods decisively. “That way my sewing ro—I mean, the wall *painting* project in your room can stay the way it is. Problem solved!” Lorraine claps, then spins and returns to the back kitchen area. “Come on, Ruby, we’ve got work to do. Thanks, Knox,” she calls.

Ruby snags the fries from the counter. “I told you not to get these for me.”

“I know.”

“And I haven’t agreed to stay at your house.” She stares up at me, her jaw set in a line of challenge. So fucking cute.

“I know.”

“Ruby!” Lorraine calls.

Ruby stands for a few more seconds, clearly caught between a rock and a hard place—or, more accurately, between me and her grandma. “Ugh. Pick me up at eight. Hopefully, we’ll have all of today’s orders done by then.” She turns and pushes through to the kitchen.

“See you then.” I smile, everything inside me lighting up like a goddamn Christmas tree at the thought of having her under my roof.

I stride out to my car, Greasy sitting on the hood and looking at me expectantly. Scratching behind his ears, I lean closer to him and whisper, “We got her, Greasy. We got her.”

“*K*nox is so sweet to let you stay with him,” Grams says as she puts the last sticker on one of the boxes to seal it closed. “I bet Merry would want to snap you up, but she just took a new job and hasn’t even had time to stop by and see me. You two are still close, right?”

As close as we can be when Merry is all about Reindeer Valley and I’m all about running away from it. But I don’t want to say that to Grams, so I settle for a simple nod, then pivot to what I really want to know.

“What’s going on with Knox?” I ask, leaning my hip against the counter. I’ve been dying to pepper my grandma with questions about him, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. She’d know something was up then. I had to wait for her to say something first, to give me the opening I needed.

Of course she waited until minutes before he’s supposed to be here to pick me up to break her silence on the topic.

“What do you mean?” she asks a bit too innocently.

“He’s different.”

“He’s grown up. He’s not a boy anymore. He also doesn’t have that mother of his whispering things into his ear anymore. People can say what they want about your mom—getting pregnant at 16, as wild as the day is long—but at least she had enough sense to realize she wasn’t made for motherhood.”

I stare at her in surprise. She doesn't talk about Sandra often. "I've never really been upset that she left me with you. You know that, right, Grams?" That's the honest truth. My grams had given me the best childhood. I wouldn't change a thing.

"Of course I do, sweetheart."

Mom was young when she had me. Too young, really. She's a bit of a drifter. I'm thankful she didn't try to take me with her when she decided to leave Reindeer Valley. God knows what might have happened to me if she had.

Grams gives me a tired but warm smile. "I'm only saying that some parents can be toxic, and it can take a minute for their kids to shake loose from that influence."

"All right," I agree, understanding what she's getting at. Or at least I try to understand. It's hard to let things go easily when they've stuck with you for so many years. Mom leaving me is a pretty terrible memory. Even if Grams took the best care of me and gave me a great childhood, I still grew up knowing my mother ditched me. But like Grams says, it was for the best. In fact, it was probably the most unselfish thing my mother ever did for me, and isn't that a kicker?

"I'm just glad you're back." She takes my hands, and I notice how the wrinkles next to her eyes have deepened. She's aged, but somehow she's stayed just as beautiful. I hope I got all those good genes.

"Me too." I squeeze her hands.

She blinks, her eyes watering, and takes a deep breath before letting me go. "Now don't be rushing here first thing in the morning. I have a few girls helping me, and this kitchen can only fit so many." Something isn't adding up here. When she called me to come home, she sounded as if she was desperate for my help, and now she's telling me not to come in? What the heck?

"All right, so you want me to come in the early afternoon?" I ask to clarify. As soon as the words slip past my lips, I hear the bell on the front door of the bakery ring. I know it must be Knox because the sign has already been flipped to closed.

“That should work.” She gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Go on now. I’ll lock up.” She waves me off. I want to ask her more questions, but I know my time has run out.

“Love you,” I throw over my shoulder before I head toward the front. Knox is standing in the center of the bakery waiting for me with something pink and fluffy in one of his hands. When his eyes come to mine, a smile pulls at his lips. Why does he have to be so damn handsome?

“Your girlfriend isn't going to get mad that another woman is staying at your house?” I lift one of my eyebrows at him.

“Nora is not my girlfriend.”

Relief fills me instantly with his words. I watch as he opens the pink thing in his hands, and I realize it’s a coat. “In.”

“Whose coat is that? Is it Nora’s?” I take a step back, not wanting to touch anything that has come in contact with that mean-spirited woman.

“Why would I have Nora’s coat?” He closes the space between us and starts putting the coat on me.

“I don’t know. She could have left it at your house or in your car.”

“She’s never been in either.” He buttons it up. “Are you jealous?” He smirks.

“Knox, I swear on Christmas cookies I will smack you.”

“Liar, you wouldn’t hurt a soul.”

“Knox.” I sigh.

“I got the coat for you, obviously. I know you love pink. You always have.”

I’m taken aback, to say the least. “How do you know that?”

“You always wear it.”

“Again, how do you know that?” I laugh.

“Instagram.”

“Instagram? You don’t even have the Gram or Facebook.” The second I say the words, I know I’ve said too much. It’s only confirmed when Knox smiles even bigger than he already is. I don’t know what it is about this man that makes my lips all loose. And we all know what they say about those.

“And how do you know that? Have you been looking for me?” His tone is teasing, and dammit, sexy too. Ugh.

I might as well 'fess up now.

“Sometimes I get bored and poke around. Shall we go? I'm hungry. I can't live off sweets and a few fries.” I quickly change the subject, not wanting to delve any deeper into that conversation.

“There you go lying to me again.”

“Oh, hush.” I smack his chest. His hand comes down onto mine, trapping it against him.

“I’ve been hushed for far too long, Ruby.”

My fingers flex against his hard chest. “What does that even mean?”

“It means I’m going to kiss you.” He doesn’t give me time to respond or second-guess it. His other arm around my waist pulls me flush against him as his mouth comes down onto mine.

His lips are gentle as he kisses me tenderly. The softness of it has my knees growing weak. I’m thankful he’s got a hold on me.

“Open for me babe, been dying to taste you for far too long,” he says, his tongue licking along the seam of my mouth.

I part my lips, giving him what he asked for. His tongue meets mine, and I start to kiss him back. I swear I hear what sounds like a small growl leave him.

The kiss turns quickly from soft and sweet to something else altogether. I forget where we are until he breaks his mouth away from mine. I gasp to catch my breath.

“Knew you’d taste as sweet as you are,” he says, his eyes still on my mouth. I can still feel his lips there. My brain is mush as I stare up at him.

Never in a million years did I think there would be something sweet about Knox. Especially his kisses. But I was so, so wrong.

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“*Y*ou live over here?” she asks as she peers out the passenger side window.

She’s been avoiding my gaze ever since that kiss, but I’ve noticed how her cheeks are still a warm pink and the way she touches her mouth every so often in a sort of absentminded way—as if she’s remembering how my lips felt on hers.

“Here? No.”

“So ...” She finally looks at me. “What are we doing by City Hall?”

“You’re hungry.” I pull up in front of Ms. Minnie’s Kitchen.

Her eyes widen. “Is this the Ms. Minnie who had that little cart at the—”

“Christmas tree lightings every year? Yeah, it’s her.”

“Oh my God!” She clasps her hands. “She always made the best little sandwiches with the ham and the melty cheese and that sauce. Waffle fries were always—” She does a chef’s kiss on her fingers.

I can’t help but smile. She’s seriously too adorable, and I want to kiss her so badly right now. But she’s hungry, and there’s no way I’m going to make her wait another second to get comfortable.

“Don’t forget the funnel cakes.” I step out of the car and go around to help her out.

“She makes funnel cakes here? In this fancy spot?” She looks up at the façade with Ms. Minnie’s name in bright lights.

“She makes whatever she likes.” I lead her through the door.

When the scent of powdered sugar hits us, Ruby leans against me. “This is heaven.”

Minnie is in the dining room speaking with a table full of customers, but she comes toward us the minute she sees me.

“Partner!” She strides up and catches me in a bear hug. Minnie is the tallest woman in town, not to mention the strongest. I swear she almost breaks one of my ribs.

“Hi, Minnie.” I groan.

“Partner?” Ruby asks.

“Is this Ms. Ruby Lane?” Minnie releases me then takes Ruby’s hands in hers. “I remember you, little thing. You used to always order double funnel cake.”

“Yes!” Ruby smiles big. “That’s me.”

“I’m glad you’re back in town.” She cuts a look at me. “And I’m certain I’m not the only one.”

I clear my throat.

“And by partner, I mean that this business savvy young man helped me get set up in this fabulous space. A little capital goes a long way.” She smiles, her eyes bright. “Now come on, you two. The best table is waiting.”

Ruby looks at me, confusion and amusement playing across her face as we’re led to a cozy booth in the back near the kitchen. Ruby sits, and then I scoot her in against the wall and sit beside her.

“Get comfy. I’m bringing out the big guns.” Minnie heads to the kitchen, and her booming voice is lost in the sound of pots, pans, and a busy staff.

“This place is packed.” Ruby looks around. “You did this?”

“I saw an opportunity to help someone.”

“You saw an opportunity to help someone?” She stares at me in disbelief.

“You? A Lovejoy? You wanted to help someone?”

“That name isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.” I thank the server who brings our drinks.

“You aren’t ...” She chews her bottom lip.

“You should really let me do that for you.”

“What?”

“This?” I lean over and pull her bottom lip between my teeth.

She gasps, her hands going to my chest as I suck her lip then kiss her again. I’m trying to go slow, to be gentle, but I find myself pressing her against the wall, caging her in. Her heart is racing, and I have to force myself to back off.

“Ruby.” I pull back.

“Yes?” she asks breathily, her eyes heavy-lidded.

Fuck, the things I want to do to her. I don’t care that half the restaurant is staring at us. All I care about is making this woman happy in every way I can. But on that note, I try to backburner my desire for her and see to her needs. “Let’s eat.” I wave to the server, and he drops a basket of fried cheese onto the table.

“Is this a chocolate malt with Oreo cream?” She pulls her drink toward her and takes a sip, then lets out a little moan that sends a blast of heat through me. “It is! And cheese! God, I need this.” She takes a little nugget from the basket and pops it into her mouth. “So hot, so good.”

I push the basket toward her. “Eat up. There’s plenty more where that came from.” As if reading my mind, Minnie sidles up and drops some soft pretzels onto the table with her homemade beer cheese on the side.

“Heaven!” Ruby exclaims.

Minnie winks at her, then returns to the kitchen.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Yes.” I take a piece of pretzel, dip it into the cheese, then offer it to Ruby.
“But you first.”

She opens for me, and I slide the food onto her tongue. She closes her mouth a little too quickly, catching my finger between her lips.

My cock surges, and every dirty thought I’ve ever had about this woman tries to surface. “Enjoy it.” My voice is low, almost hoarse, as I pull my finger away.

“It’s good.” She licks her lips as she peers into my eyes. “A lot better than I remember, actually.”

Are we talking about the food or me? I don’t care. Either way, she’s happy, and that’s enough.

She takes a sip of her drink. “What’s happening here, Knox?”

“We’re eating.”

“No.” She washes down the rest of the pretzel and turns back to me. “You and me. The airport and the kissing and the staying at your place. Is this some sort of long game?”

“This isn’t a game, Ruby.” I stroke her hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear.

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand. I want to make you happy.”

She blinks slowly. “Why?”

Because I love you. “Why not?”

“That’s not an answer, Knox, and you know it.” She frowns.

Minnie drops off a basket of the toasted ham and cheese sandwiches that are her mainstay, and Ruby can’t help but reach for one.

“We’re still having this conversation,” she chides. “I just need to taste test this and make sure the recipe is—Oh.” She takes a second bite. “Oh my cupcakes. These are even better than I remember.” She chews as I watch with unfiltered amusement. I love every sound she makes, every little exclamation of pleasure. In fact, I want to hear them all the time, especially when she’s in my bed.

“Minnie is incomparable in the mini-sandwich game. Eat up.”

Ruby takes another. “We’re still talking, like I said. I need more of an explanation. Why are you being so nice? And why is your mouth so... so...” She takes a particularly aggressive bite of her sandwich. “So—”

“Bro!”

Fuck. I know that voice.

“Bro-ski!”

Ruby freezes.

Shit.

“Todd.” I turn and find my old high school friend Todd Davies. An all-around piece of shit who peaked in senior year and has been trying to relive the ‘glory days’ ever since. His family is rich, but nowhere near the Lovejoy level. He always had a chip on his shoulder about that fact. Not to mention, he’s also the same immature jackass he always was.

“Knox, bro. Long time, man. How you doing?” He leans over, his gaze catching on Ruby.

I tense.

“Is that ... Yeah, it is! Ruby!” He laughs. “Didn’t see that one coming.”

“What do you mean, Todd?” I try to keep my tone level, even as I can feel Ruby holding her breath.

“You know.” He stands straight again and gives me a conspiratorial look. “You slumming it. But I guess you got to get that cheap pussy sometim—”

I move before I even know I’m doing it.

And the next thing I know, Todd is on the floor, my knuckles are stinging, and the restaurant is shocked into silence.

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RUBY

Violence should never be the choice if there's a way to avoid it. In fact, it's disgusting. Well, at least normally it is. Right now, I'm feeling far from disgusted as I watch Knox standing up for me. He looms over Todd, who is laid out on the floor with his hand at his chin. I think he's as shocked as everyone else in the restaurant.

"Keep running that mouth of yours, and I'll break your jaw next time." Knox takes a step toward him.

The jerk's eyes widen, and he starts to try to crab walk backwards to get away from him. Knox leans down to grab him. Todd doesn't get far before Knox nabs him.

"Knox, man. The hell? We're buds."

Knox yanks Todd to his feet by the collar of his shirt. Blood pools in the corner of Todd's mouth. I know I shouldn't feel a sense of satisfaction at the sight of it, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't. Todd is a bully. He always has been and obviously never changed over the years. It's nice to see someone put him in his place.

"We're not buds. Now apologize to my girl."

"Your gi—" Todd shuts up when Knox pulls him closer and says something into his ear too low for me to hear. Todd's face goes as white as a ghost, all of the blood draining from it. "I'm sorry, Ruby. I'm an asshole."

“Okay,” I agree. What else am I supposed to say? “Let him go, Knox. I don’t want our food to get cold.” I pat the seat next to me, trying to lure him back. There’s a glint in Knox’s eye that has me worrying for Todd. I’ve never seen this side of Knox, but I’m learning there’s a lot more to this man than I ever realized.

“Don’t come back in here.” He releases Todd with a shove. Todd stumbles forward a few steps before getting his footing and taking off out of the restaurant without looking back.

“You banned him. I think that might be worse than hitting him. To know this food is in our town but he can’t have it anymore. That’s cold,” I tease, trying to calm Knox. The anger rolling off of him is intense. He shifts his gaze back to me. His eyes soften before he smirks. I press my thighs together. Let’s be honest, I’m way too turned on by all this.

“A round of dessert and drinks for everyone. It’s on the house,” Knox declares to the restaurant before he slips back into his seat, leaving not a centimeter of space between us.

The whole restaurant applauds.

“I’m sorry.” He leans over and places a kiss on the shell of my ear.

“Why are you sorry? He’s the prick.”

“I made the mistake of letting him think we were friends at one time and that he could say something like that to me without getting his ass laid out.”

“So you weren’t friends?”

“Nope. I don’t know what you call the people I hung out with in high school. Users? Immature idiots? But they definitely weren’t my friends.” He shrugs. “I suppose I used them back to a degree as well.”

“Wow,” I say, surprised once again at his candor. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? The hell for?” He smiles, gazing at me curiously.

I reach out, placing my hand on his thigh, needing to touch him for some reason. It’s like my head is fighting with my heart, and this time, my heart wins.

“That sounds sad is all. You were so popular. Had so many friends back then. It’s crazy to think you were really lonely.”

His brows pull together. I would have never guessed that about him back then. I thought he was on top of the world. That he had everything.

“I suppose I was,” he says. His expression makes me think he’s realizing that for the first time too. “It wasn’t all bad, though. I got to see you every day back then.” He winks at me before dipping a bite of the pretzel into the beer cheese and bringing it to my mouth. I open, taking it.

We spend most of the meal that way—with him feeding me more often than he feeds himself. We don’t speak much. It’s hard to when there is so much yummy food to eat.

“I can’t eat anymore!” I say through a laugh when they try to bring out more desserts. Minnie already gave me a double helping of funnel cake with extra powdered sugar like the good ol’ days. God, I missed this so much.

“Box it.” Knox slides the plates to the edge of the table. “We can have cake for breakfast.”

Minnie lifts her brows, giving me a knowing smile. At least she thinks it’s knowing. Knox’s words make it sound as though I’m staying over and we’ll be doing much more than sleeping.

“Knox.” I elbow him in the side when she takes the plate back to box the cake for us. “She thinks we’re going to…” I trail off.

“What? You’re staying over. It sounds to me like you’re the one with a dirty mind.”

I roll my eyes at him. “You also announced to the whole restaurant that I’m your girl.” That’s going to spread around town faster than a wildfire. The people here live for gossip.

“You are my girl,” he says, standing. “Thanks, Minnie.” He takes the to-go box from her hand.

“Anytime. You know that.”

“Thank you, Minnie. Everything was so wonderful.” I take Knox’s hand to help me get up. Between the food, traveling, and working with Grams, I’m dead on my feet. “You tempt me to move home knowing you’re here cooking all this deliciousness every day.”

“Pretty sure that’s the plan.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me before she’s off to another table.

“Come on. I want to get you home. You need rest.” Knox tangles his fingers with mine, leading me out of the restaurant. I let him. Just like I let him kiss me and defend me and tell me so many nice things. I don’t know what’s happening, but I *do* know I like the way Knox makes me feel. Maybe I shouldn’t question it so much.

People openly stare at us as we go.

“You know you’re creating rumors,” I tell him when we get back into the car.

“Are they rumors if they’re true?”

I shake my head. “I don’t live here anymore, Knox. We can’t be a thing. It would never work.” I’m not sure if I’m trying to convince him or myself.

We ride in silence for a while, and he takes my hand. His calluses are so different than what I imagined. *He’s* so different. Not what I remember at all. Except for the handsome part. But maybe I’m not the same, either? Maybe I’ve grown and changed, too.

“It’s not a thing,” I think I hear him say.

Then I get distracted by pink Christmas lights on an adorable cottage-style house. This house wasn’t here before. Okay, there was a house here. But it was an old, rundown one that was uninhabitable when I left for the big city. This one is brand new.

“Look. They have pink Christmas lights.”

“I sure do.” Knox pulls into the driveway.

“You live here?” I gasp.

“Yep, like it?”

“Like it? I freaking love it.” I turn my gaze away from the house to him.
“You’re trying to seduce me with pink Christmas lights!”

It’s totally working.

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KNOX

She yawns as we walk in. Traveling and working at the bakery must've worn her out.

"It smells like Christmas in here." She takes a deep breath, then squeals as Greasy comes trotting down the hall. "Hi!"

"Greasy, this is Ruby. Ruby, meet Greasy." I pull her luggage in then close the door.

She's already on her knees as Greasy soaks up every bit of her attention. "Oh, what a good little kitty. How handsome! Not Greasy at all. More like a dark angel. A *Christmas* angel!"

I give Greasy a hard look, but his purrs quickly melt my jealousy. I guess I can share Ruby for a brief moment with him. After all, I never bring anyone home, so he's probably over the moon with relief that I do, in fact, like other humans from time to time. Though Ruby is much more than just a 'like.' I can admit she's an obsession. Ever since high school, I've wanted her. But there were too many barriers in my way—ones I never should've let stand in the first place. I can't change the past, but I can show Ruby I'm different now, here in the present.

"I never would've pictured you as a cat person." She looks up, her face lit by the sparkling Christmas tree in the living room.

"It's not like I got the chance to choose. Greasy showed up one day and decided I was his human. He doesn't allow takesies backsies, I can assure

you. Not on treats, not on toys, and definitely not on me.”

“Well, he’s a kitty who knows what he wants.” She scratches under his chin, and he melts into a puddle in her lap. “You think you might be in the market for another human to add to your collection?”

He gives her a love nip on her arm for an answer.

My jealousy tries to kick in, which is ridiculous. Greasy is a cat—and my best friend. “Easy, Greasy. She’s not up for grabs.”

He purrs louder and rolls over, showing her his belly.

“Why you little—”

Ruby yawns again.

I take her arm and help her to her feet. “Your room is this way.”

“Oh, I thought I’d be crashing on the couch or something.” She glances at the living room.

“No, it’s a three bedroom. You have your own private bath, and I’ve stocked it with everything you might need.” I lead her down the hall and to the right. The room is beside mine, but I sure as hell wish she’d be staying in bed with me. But I can’t rush her. I feel like I’ve already done too much, which is a problem because I want to do so much more.

“Wow, you have such good taste. Well, to me anyway.” She runs her hand down the pink and purple quilt on the bed. “It’s just what I would pick if I were decorating a guest room.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I open the door to her bathroom. “Tub and separate shower, towels in the linen closet there. I’m right next door if you need anything.”

She stands in the bathroom doorway, then turns to me. “This is weird. It’s weird, right?”

“What’s weird?” I step toward her, invading her space despite my brain telling me to slow down.

“You and me. All this. You kissing me. It’s so ... not what I thought coming home would be like.”

“What did you think it would be like?” I breathe her in and let myself fall even more in love with her. I can’t help it. I never could.

“Like high school, I guess. Where you and your fanboys and girls gave people like me the cold shoulder because our bank accounts were missing some zeroes at the end.” She sighs. “I didn’t think you’d be so ...”

“Handsy?” I say.

She laughs, her eyes lighting up. “Well, yes. That was definitely not a possibility in my thought process. But you’re a mechanic who invests in local businesses and helps my grams at the shop—yeah, she told me about all the repairs you’ve done at no charge. You laid out Todd—a guy who worshipped the ground you walked on—just because he said something about me. None of this adds up. And I keep coming back to the same question.”

I cup her cheek, and she leans into my touch, seemingly despite herself. She’s warm and soft beneath my touch.

“Why?” She meets my gaze.

“Does it matter why?” I move closer, needing more from her.

“Of course it does. I come home from the city expecting a shit show, but here you are being so ... so ... so ...”

“Handsome, thoughtful, sexy?” I supply.

“Yes!” Her cheeks turn a cute pink as she shakes her head gently. “I mean no.”

“No?”

“Yes.” She sighs. “I don’t know.”

“You’re tired, Ruby.” I move even closer, my lips so close to hers. “You need to go to bed.” I kiss her, taking her mouth fully.

She makes a sound low in her throat and clings to me, her hands gripping the front of my shirt as I back her against the wall. I feel every bit of her, her round breasts, the curve of her thighs against mine. God, she’s all I’ve ever

wanted, and she's right in front of me.

I kiss the ever-loving shit out of her. I can't stop. And when she rubs her thighs together and moans, I think something in my mind pops, and I'm carrying her to the bed and laying her down.

When I cover her with my body, I almost hiss at the heat between her thighs. Fuck, I need to be inside her, need to know what it feels like to be completely one with someone else for the first time. I've saved everything for Ruby; every last bit of me belongs only to her.

She wraps her arms around my neck as I tongue her sweet mouth, plundering her. Her grip on me is desperate, holding on to me as I move my hips against her, dry humping her through our clothes. My body is taut, my control hanging by the thinnest thread. And I'm so damn hot for her I might explode like a million fireworks and rain down nothing but sparks all over my shimmering Ruby.

"Knox." She gasps as I pull my mouth from hers and suck her neck in open-mouthed kisses.

I want to taste every inch.

She moves her hips against mine in a faster rhythm, and I can feel her need. Something wild inside me has already broken loose, but now it roars as I slide down her body and lick the seam of her leggings. She's wet, her pussy soaked for me.

A moan escapes her, and I don't stop licking her. I spread her legs wider and press my shoulders between them, then I bring my fingers to the sweet spot between her legs, grip the fabric, and yank. Her leggings rip at the center, and I find a pair of pink panties beneath. I suck the fabric between my teeth, drawing out her pussy juice before pushing them aside and licking her pink, wet skin.

She jerks, her back arching, and I swirl my tongue around her clit. Learning what she likes. Memorizing her sweet cunt. When I focus on her clit, her breath catches, and she comes on a low moan. I can't get enough. I keep sucking and licking, giving her pleasure as her body ebbs and flows with a pleasurable tide. When her lower back finally hits the bed again, I lick her

slowly, then pull back. My cock is so hard I could fuck a hole through solid steel, but this isn't about me. It's about Ruby, about how much I want to give her.

Sitting back, I lick my lips as she watches. "Sorry about your pants."

She laughs almost hysterically and shakes her head. "I don't even know what to say."

I lean up and kiss her mouth, gently this time. "I do."

"Yeah?" She smiles up at me, her eyelids heavy.

"Goodnight, sweet Ruby." One more kiss and I force myself out of the bed. If I don't, she'll never get any rest.

"You're leaving?" She sits up.

"If I don't, I'll pin you to the bed and fuck you all night long." I gesture toward my pants.

Her eyes widen, and she licks her lips.

I groan and back away to the door. "Get some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay," she says breathily. *Fucking sexy.*

I close the door and look over at Greasy, who I have no doubt was watching the whole thing. "Don't let me through this door. She needs to sleep." I run a hand through my hair.

He flicks his tail then curls up in front of Ruby's door, his chin on his paws.

I sigh and go to my room, all the while savoring the rest of my sweet girl's taste on my lips.

RUBY

I wake to the smell of bacon, coffee, Knox, and something sweet all mixed together. This has to be what heaven smells like. I stretch, sitting up in the giant comfy bed. It's nothing like the one I have back in the city. That one is only a freaking twin. Unfortunately, it's the only option if I want to have anything else in the room.

I was sure I would never be able to sleep after what Knox and I did, but I was dead wrong. I was out within seconds. It was honestly the best night of rest I've had in a really long time. A rush of heat fills me when I replay last night in my mind.

I'd wanted him so badly to come to bed with me. It had been on the tip of my tongue to tell him I'd be okay with him fucking me all night long, but I'm not sure I'm ready for that. I'm still trying to figure out what's happening between us.

Twenty-four hours ago, I'd been dreading seeing Knox. Now I've done a complete one-eighty, and I'm excited to see him. I'm still a bit shy but excited nonetheless. I've always been drawn to him, even back in high school. There were those few moments I'd had with him when I swore there was something more. This connection whenever our eyes would lock. What if we were always destined to be?

"Get over yourself," I mumble at the silly thought.

As much as I hate to think it, if I hadn't been forced back here, I'd still be in the city living my life with no plans to return to Reindeer Valley. It's not some sweet romance story where he willed me back with his love. Nonsense. I came back here on my own. *Not* because Knox wanted me here.

But does that matter? I'm not sure. I haven't been saving myself for marriage, but I *have* been saving myself for someone special. My mom might not have shown me what a good relationship should be, but my Grams did. The way Grandpa was with her before he passed set the bar high. The stories she tells me about them together has always made me long for a love like that of my own.

I'd moved to the city to get away and try something new, but my dream even as a little girl was to one day have a family of my own in Reindeer Valley. Each year I spend away is a year I'm losing with Grams. And if I face the honest truth and actually level with myself, the real reason I ran from here was to give myself space from Knox.

I knew I needed distance to get over the silly, consuming crush I'd had on him. I thought I had somehow allowed myself to fall for what I believed was the wrong kind of man. Something I told myself I'd never do. That was a habit my mom had and one I didn't want to inherit. So I left. I had to or I'd have thrown myself at the rich asshole who'd shred my heart and break me into a million pieces.

The door creaks open only a smidge, and Greasy takes full advantage and slips in. He comes over to the bed and jumps up, making himself right at home on my lap. He purrs loudly as he gets comfortable.

"Morning, beautiful baby." I pet him. He quickly rolls over, giving me his tummy.

A soft knock hits the door seconds before Knox opens it to reveal himself in all his glory. When I see him standing there shirtless in low hanging sweatpants, I want to fling myself at him and beg for a repeat of last night, but I somehow manage to keep it together. Thank God this cat is in my lap, or it might be a different story. How does he look so damn good first thing in the morning?

“You always look this hot when you wake up?” he asks, leaning up against the doorframe.

I snort a laugh. “Yeah right.” I start to try to smooth down my hair. I bet I’m a hot mess and he’s trying to be nice.

“I’ll come over there and prove how hot I think you are.” He reaches down and openly adjusts his cock.

“Knox!” Heat blooms throughout my whole body.

“As much as I want to spread you wide on that bed right now, I also want to feed you before you go into the bakery.”

“Crap!” I pick Greasy up from my lap to quickly get out of bed. I kiss his little head before putting him down. “What time is it?” I hurry over to my suitcase. I don’t even reach it before Knox snags me around the waist and pulls me into his giant body. His mouth comes down onto mine. “Morning breath,” I whisper when he breaks the kiss sooner than I actually wanted.

“You taste sweet to me.” He gives my ass a squeeze. “Put some pants on. You’re killing me here.”

“Okay, then let me go.”

“For now,” he agrees and releases his hold on me so I can get dressed.

When I come back out, he’s pouring me a glass of orange juice. Two full plates of food already sit on the oversized dining room table.

“Do you entertain a lot?” I asked.

This home is not only built for entertaining but a family too. He had to have that in mind when he had it constructed.

“No.” He chuckles, pulling my chair out for me.

He’s now dressed in jeans and a simple black shirt that stretches across his broad chest. I swear he looks hot no matter what. I’d only tossed on another pair of yoga pants and a festive holiday shirt. It’s nice not having to get all dolled up or put a suit on for work.

“But this house is like a showplace. Perfect for the holidays.” It’s decorated for Christmas so prettily it’s like a professional elf did it. I can’t help but picture having other couples come over for game night or movies with your little ones snuggled up by the fireplace.

“Never been my thing, but if you want to throw a holiday party or something you can. You can have Merry over too if you want. I know you two are close. I want you to be comfortable here and treat it as if it’s your home.”

“Thanks. I’m sure Merry would love to come over.” I smile at him. I love that he brought up Merry and remembered how we were so close in school. I’ve managed to keep up with her here and there, and she’s the only person from town besides Grams I still talk to on the regular.

He once again takes the seat next to me and not across. “I’m starting to think you paid more attention to me back in high school than I realized.”

“You have no idea.”

“Then tell me,” I encourage him, hoping he’ll give me something.

“Maybe one day. Right now, I’m still trying to get you to fall for me.” He winks as he pours syrup over my pancakes.

I don’t think Knox knows how much I paid attention to him either. That I’d fallen for him long ago. I thought I was over my silly crush, but now it seems like I’m falling harder than ever. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to pick myself back up this time if he crushes my heart again.

KNOX

“*W*hat are you going to do while I’m elbow deep in buttercream?” She glances at me.

I squeeze her fingers in mine. “Well, that’s a very descriptive way to describe bakery work.”

She shrugs. “I guess I have a way with words.”

She definitely has a way with me. God, I want to do so many inappropriate things to her right now that I can hardly stand it.

“I have some work to do at the shop. Can’t let these calluses go to waste, now can I?”

“You working on cars.” She shakes her head. “I think I’d enjoy watching that.”

“Yeah? You can see me on my back anytime you want, Red. You know that.” I smirk at her.

She blushes, and I don’t miss the way she presses her thighs together.

I pull up in front of the bakery and lean over, pressing my lips to her ear. “I need another taste of you, Ruby. Sooner rather than later.”

She shivers. “Knox!”

“What?” I take her chin and pull her mouth to mine. “I want you, Ruby. I’ll do whatever I can to get you. Including eating your pussy until you—”

She kisses me, stopping my words with a hot kiss and her curious tongue. I answer her, tilting her head to kiss her more deeply. She’s so soft and warm, her skin silky beneath my fingertips. I don’t know how I survived so long without her touch, but I’m damn sure never letting her go now that I’ve got her.

I tangle my fingers in her hair and run my other hand along her throat and then lower, cupping her breast through her shirt.

She whimpers when I graze the hard tip with my thumb. Fuck, that sound is going to make me cream in my jeans.

“Knox.” She pulls back and tries to catch her breath.

I don’t let her. Instead, I pull her to me again, taking her mouth as she melts for me, giving up and letting me have my way. I love her surrender, the way she opens for me, the way her pussy feels so hot when I cup her between her legs.

A knock at the window jolts me out of my lust. Rage boils up in its place as I turn to find Merry standing on the curb and pretending not to look right at us.

“Merry!” Ruby squeals, her eyes widening.

I’ve lost her. Damn.

“One more.” I grip the back of her neck and pull her to me, giving her a possessive kiss before releasing her and getting out of the car.

“Merry.” I give her a short nod, doing my best to run around the car before she sees my massive erection.

When I open the door for Ruby, she gets an eyeful of the hard length in my pants, and when she stares at it for a beat longer than seems Christian, I almost lose it.

“Ruby?” Merry calls and clears her throat.

“Right. Gotta go.” Ruby stands and gives me a sweet, sexy smile. “I guess I’ll see you later.”

“Count on it.” I close her car door and walk her up onto the sidewalk. I can hear Lorraine from here. She’s yelling at whatever incompetent help she’d arranged for the morning. Ruby’s going to have a long day. I only hope she’s not too worn out to let me devour her again tonight.

She and Merry hug and fall into a quick, hushed conversation—likely about me—so I have to take my leave and drive all of two blocks over to my shop.

Greasy is already sitting on the TransAm by the time I walk in. “I figured you’d be at the bakery making big Puss in Boots eyes at Ruby.” I pet him as two cars pull up in front of the oil change bay.

His eyes glint, and for a second I think he might take my idea and run off toward the bakery. But he doesn’t, just headbutts me gently.

“Good boy.” I kiss him on top of his head between the ears. “Do you think she’s falling for me?” I whisper.

He headbutts me again, and I take that as a good sign.

The morning flies by as I do some engine work on the town snowplow and a trickle of customers show up needing tune-ups, tires, or oil changes. My employees handle most of that while I work on transmissions, engines, and any deeper issues that show up in the day-to-day. When lunchtime hits, I’m on my way to pick up lunch from the diner and then back over to the bakery.

Before I can even reach the door, the scent of vanilla and some sort of spice cake fills the air. My mouth waters. But not for any confection created in the bakery. I want Ruby.

When I walk in, she comes from the back, a smudge of chocolate on her jaw and flour dusting her apron.

“Hey.” She greets me brightly. “Didn’t I just see you?”

“I can’t get enough.” I shrug and put the food on the counter.

She peeks inside. “Oh my God, what’s today? Is it beef stroganoff day?” She inhales. “It is!”

I take the packages of food and open the top one. The stroganoff steams as Ruby tears a fork free from the to-go napkin.

“It’s hot.” I take the fork from her and select some noodles and beef from the creamy sauce, then blow on them. “Open.”

She does, her pink tongue giving me so many filthy ideas. I slide the bite of stroganoff onto her tongue, and she chews with a sensual moan. “So good. Even better than I remember.”

“Beef stroganoff day?” Lorraine pops through the kitchen door and pulls out another plate from the bag. “You can feed me, too, if you like, young man.” She gives me a cheeky grin and flips the top off the to-go container.

“Grams!” Ruby laughs.

“Worth a shot.” She takes the plate and a fork back into the kitchen.

“Grams is right. You miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take, right?”

“Are you suggesting I share you with Grams?” Ruby laughs as I fork some more stroganoff for her.

“Never.” I feed her again, loving the way she enjoys every last bite.

“More orders?” I ask.

“Some Olin guy—” She narrows her eyes at me. “Who I heard from Merry might just work for your family—keeps placing orders for cakes, cookies, you name it. We’re swamped.”

I suppose I should pull back on the flood of orders. Keep it busy enough that Ruby has to stay, but not so busy that I don’t get to spend time with her.

Leaning over the counter, I kiss her.

She smiles against my mouth. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Is it working?” I nibble her bottom lip.

“Maybe.” She fists my shirt and pulls me closer, kissing me in earnest.

“Ruby! We forgot the timer on these strawberry cupcakes!” Lorraine calls from the back.

I groan as Ruby pulls away.

“No rest for the wicked, right? See you after work.” She blows me a kiss and disappears into the back of the store, leaving me wanting more. Always wanting more.

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RUBY

“*I* know you enjoy spending time with me, but that smile of yours is relentless,” Grams says as I pull my apron off.

“I love this time of year. It always makes me smile.” I don’t admit it’s because of Knox, not wanting to get Grams’ hopes up. She’s loving the idea of Knox and me being a thing. I’m not sure what we are, but I’m enjoying it for now. The way he is with me makes it hard not to.

“Oh, so you’re saying the holidays were just as good in the city?” She lifts one of her brows knowing I’m full of shit. I never could get anything past Grams.

“They were different.”

“Different as in terrible.”

“I suppose,” I finally admit.

“See? It’s time you moved back home.” She gives me one of her firm chin nods that always means she’s made up her mind and there’s no longer a need to discuss it further. She’s said her piece, and I should do as she suggested.

“You want me to come home that badly?” I peek into the mirror above the sink to make sure I’m not a total mess before Knox comes to pick me up.

“I never wanted you to leave in the first place. But I knew I had to let you follow your dreams or you’d resent me later on in life.”

“What?” I spin back around to face her. She’s already got her coat on and is ready to head home for the night. We don’t have a million and one orders due tomorrow. “I could never resent you, Grams. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Honey, I’m not going to stop you from wanting to go out there and see the world. If I told you I didn’t want you to go anywhere, that’s what you would have done. You need to figure that out for yourself. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t miss you. I tried to understand when you didn’t come home to visit. I really did, but my Christmas cookies, Ruby, I’ve always wanted you here. Even when I was trying to give you space so you could spread your wings, I missed you something terrible.”

“I’ve missed you so much.” I walk over, wrapping her in a tight hug.

“As much as I don’t want to tell you what to do, I’m ready for you to come back anytime now. Maybe give me a few grandbabies. Sooner rather than later. I’m not going to live forever, you know?” She’s really laying it on thick tonight.

“Grams!” I say through a laugh.

“Go on now.” She waves me out of the back of the kitchen when she hears the bell for the front door chime. She doesn’t have to hurry me along. My feet were already moving the second I heard the sound, too. I fight not to run, not wanting to be overzealous. I’ve got to play it cool. Even if the last thing I’ve ever been in my life is cool.

“Red.” Knox clears the space between us faster than I do the second he sees me. My feet leave the ground as he lifts me and plants a kiss right on me. “Missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I admit.

“What are you thinking of for dinner?”

“I actually promised Merry I’d go over to Crazy Eights with her tonight.”

The smile immediately falls from his face.

“You can come with me if you like,” I offer.

“Two pretty girls going to the local dive bar alone doesn’t sound like the best idea. Yeah, I’ll come.”

“Good.” I drop another kiss on him. “I want to change first.”

“All right.” He gives my ass a squeeze before putting me back on my feet.

Why is all this so easy with him? Like we’ve been doing it for years not days?

I text Merry, giving her a heads-up that there was a small change of plans. I know it’s supposed to be a girls’ night, but I do want to spend time with Knox, too. I need to figure out what this is between us. I have a whole other life states away.

With how Knox has been with me, I’m feeling a bit bold when I’m picking out my clothes for the night. I decide on a black sweater dress I was saving for the company Christmas party but brought home just in case Grams scheduled some sort of Christmas merriment. Unlike my plans for the party where I was going to wear tights or leggings, I do without. I pair it with black velvet boots that go up my calves but add some red sock cuffs to the top of the boots to give it a pop for Christmas.

“Red,” Knox growls when I step out of the bedroom.

“You like?” I ask, doing a small spin. “It has pockets.” I slip my hands into them to show him. It’s one of my favorite things about it.

Knox’s eyes narrow. The intensity of his gaze has my breath hitching and a flood of need pooling between my thighs. “Red.” He growls my name again as he starts to close in on me. “At least I don’t have to ruin another pair of your pants tonight.” He lifts me off my feet as he takes my mouth.

The man is always picking me up, and I can’t say I hate it. He does it with ease, and I’m not some fluff of a girl. I’ve got curves. I practically grew up in Grams’ bakery, how could I not? Knox makes me love them even more when he sits me down on the countertop with his fingers digging into my hips. The way he can grab a handful of me turns me on as much as his kisses do. I spread my legs to make room for him to step in between.

“Need a small taste to hold me over until we get home, Red.”

I let out a moan as his lips begin to trail down the column of my neck. The ache between my thighs grows more intense, knowing exactly what that mouth of his is capable of.

He drops to his knees, pulling my ass to the edge of the counter before throwing my legs over his shoulders. He buries his face between my thighs. He doesn't even bother pulling my panties off; instead, he yanks them to the side, his tongue going straight for what he wants.

I dig my fingers into his hair as he devours me. His tongue licks and sucks at my clit. Moans pour from my mouth as he quickly pushes me toward an orgasm. It's almost embarrassing how quickly he gets me off. My body has been on edge all day thinking about when I was going to get more of this.

"Knox!" I scream out his name as the orgasm hits me hard, causing my back to bow off the counter. Pleasure courses through my body, making my legs shake until my whole body just melts into a puddle.

I lie there wondering how I'm ever going to move again. I don't think it would be terrible to lie right here for the rest of my life. Anytime Knox wanted a taste he could come into his kitchen and get it. This makes perfect sense to me.

He kisses my sensitive clit, making my body jerk before he pulls my panties back into place. I let out a giggle when he begins trailing kisses down both of my thighs before he gets to his feet. I open my eyes to see him standing over me. His gaze is all over me.

"You're so fucking sexy, Red." He tucks a piece of my hair that came loose behind my ear. He looks so damn hot with his lips glistening with the evidence of my orgasm.

"What about you?" I sit up and go for his jeans.

"If we start that, we're not leaving here tonight."

"We could be fast." I lick my lips. "I've never done this, but you could teach me." He grabs me by my wrist.

"Anything you'd do would be perfect, Red."

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes. I don’t even want to think about the other girls that have given him any kind of pleasure. My stomach turns when I wonder if he ever did hook up with anyone in town. If I moved back, I’d have to see those women—women he’s been with. God, the thought is like a bucket of cold water. Who could it be, though? Merry would know. She knows everything about Reindeer Valley.

“Don’t get me wrong. I want it. Your mouth has been a fantasy of mine since high school. It can do no wrong.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to point out that maybe he could have had it then if only he’d deemed me good enough for him. But no, I was just a lowly townie to the grand Knox Lovejoy. Instead of getting his first blowie from me, he likely went and did it with someone else. Gah, I hate what this jealousy I’m feeling right now is turning me into.

“Let’s go. I don’t want to be late.” I slip off the counter, suddenly needing a drink.... or three.

KNOX

Crazy Eights is packed by the time we pull up. Ruby's been oddly quiet for the entire drive, but she won't tell me what's bothering her.

"Are you sure you're not upset?" I ask as I park.

"I'm good." She gives me a tight smile. "I guess I'm not looking forward to seeing any old faces from high school."

"I understand." I get out and go around to open her door. "But I'll be with you the whole time. If anyone says something you don't like, I'll handle it."

She gives me a nod and takes my arm. Music pours from the dive bar that's been on this corner of Reindeer Valley since its earliest days.

"It hasn't changed." She looks up at the neon sign, some of it flickering crazily.

"I don't think it ever will." I pull the door open for her, and a wave of music, beer, and noisy patrons hits us all at once.

"Whoa." She tightens her grip on my arm as I lead her inside.

A few people close to us stop for a moment and whisper amongst themselves, but most everyone is too busy with their own drama to care much about us. Good. I want it that way. If she's already nervous, prying eyes isn't what she needs.

“There’s Merry!” She points to the girl at the bar who’s waving like she’s drowning. Ruby turns and gets on her tiptoes, giving me a kiss. “I’m going to girl talk for a minute, okay?”

“Sure.” My feelings aren’t hurt because that would be ridiculous.

“Thanks.” She pulls away. And I’m not the least bit bummed as she prances across the bar in her tight dress and fuck-me boots. Nope. Not at all.

She gets to the bar and hugs Merry, who already has a drink waiting for her. There are too many people between us, so I edge around the dance floor until I have a clearer view of my girl.

Fuck, in that outfit, she’s like a magnet to every guy in this place. I don’t like it. It’s stupid and cave man and very un-feminist of me, but damn, I want to be the only one to look at her in that outfit. Just the idea of other men fantasizing about my woman makes my blood start to simmer.

“Cool it, Knox,” I murmur to myself.

Movement catches my eye, and I turn to see Todd stumbling away from me, a butterfly Band-Aid on his nose and fear in his eyes. I take a step toward him, and he turns and runs from the bar, leaving a confused woman standing just inside the door. I’d tell her that I’ve just done her a huge favor, but there’s only one woman in this bar I want to talk to.

When I turn back around to find Ruby, I don’t see her at the bar.

“Fuck.” I cut across the corner of the dancefloor and hurry to where she’d been sitting with Merry.

Two other people have already taken their spots. Where is she?

I whirl, and that’s when I see her. Dancing. She and Merry swaying and moving to the music. Ruby looks fucking hot, like my tongue would sizzle if I licked her—and I’d fucking like it. I’d be happy to stand here and watch, but the problem is, I’m not the only one looking. In fact, there are so many eyes on my woman that my skin starts to itch.

Men, all of them lusting after my sweet Ruby. I want to murder.

But Ruby said she wanted girl talk. I have to give her space. I don't want to—wait. What the fuck? Some dipshit in cowboy boots is striding right toward her.

I'm on edge, tension drawing me tighter as I find myself moving toward Ruby. I can't stop.

She and Merry are still dancing when the guy opens his mouth to yell over the music. Ruby and Merry shake their hands and continue dancing.

But he isn't giving up. I can tell by the shit-eating grin on his face that he's not used to hearing the word 'no.' Even so, Merry and Ruby shake their heads at him again.

That's when he fucks up. He reaches for her. For *my* girl.

I have his wrist before he can make contact, and I wrench it back, then shove him. He knocks into a table, sending beer bottles shattering onto the floor.

When he gets his footing again, he comes for me. I'm ready. People are still dancing all around us as he lunges for me.

"No means no, asshole." I dodge his fist, and his momentum carries him forward. I add a hard kick to his ass and send him sprawling onto the floor.

The crowd scatters a little, several people bursting into laughter as the cowboy scrambles to his feet.

"Knox!" Ruby yells, getting my attention.

She's way too close to this mess, but it's a good thing she yells because the cowboy has a friend, one with a vicious left hook that misses my jaw and makes contact with my shoulder. Cowboy is already charging me, so I make a quick decision. Dropping low, I kick out my leg and trip the friend. Cowboy tries to tackle me to the floor, but I'm able to twist and slam him down. He grunts as I add an elbow to his solar plexus, but I can't give him everything he deserves. I don't have much time before they're both on me again. I can take them, but I'm not interested in fighting when Ruby might get hurt.

“Come on!” I grab her, throwing her over my shoulder and rushing through the crowd. Merry catches up and pulls open the door for me.

“Catch you later, babe!” Merry calls as she hurries to her car. “It was fun!”

“Bye! Love you!” Ruby calls as I palm her ass and run to my car.

I put her gently in the passenger seat, then check the door of Crazy Eights. A few people are leaving, but no sign of the cowboy. Maybe he’s had enough. If he hasn’t, I’ll kick his ass in this parking lot while Ruby stays safely locked in my car.

Ruby rolls down her window. “What are you doing? Let’s go!”

I scan the door again, then get in the driver’s seat. Before she can say another word, I grab her and pull her mouth to mine. I kiss her with all the possession I feel right now. Maybe she’s not in love with me yet, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t mine. I’ve been hers all along, and I’ll be damned if I let another man so much as touch her.

When I finally release her, she’s breathless, her cheeks pink.

I start the car.

“Knox?” Her voice is shaky.

God, have I gone too far? I hope I didn’t scare her.

“Yes?” I take her hand.

“Take me home and make love to me.”

Fuck. Me.

RUBY

I know it's wrong to be turned on once again by Knox's show of violence, but clearly I have some weird new kink. This one is more tied to his jealousy, but he is just so overprotective of me. The possessive look in his eyes was my undoing. I find myself wanting to be possessed by him. Every freaking inch of me, as a matter of fact. Over and over again, hopefully.

Knox doesn't live that far from the bar, but damn does the drive feel like it's taking an eternity. I keep my thighs pressed together to help with the ever-growing throb that lies between them. It's growing worse with each second that passes. What is wrong with my body? It can't be normal that my panties are already soaked through. But who am I to say what's normal or not when it comes to these feelings?

My body has never been this way before. So ... so *horny*. Like, my gosh I didn't know this was a thing. I bet it's some crazy reaction because I've gone too long without losing my virginity or really doing much else for that matter. I'm not even that into getting myself off. I'd given up on it a few years ago because every time I tried my mind would pull up an image of Knox, and I knew I couldn't continue.

My fantasy has always put him in the starring role even years after I'd left Reindeer Valley behind. He is always front and center whenever I let my mind go to a place like that. No wonder I'm about to jump out of my skin at the thought of spreading my thighs for him.

I mean, I've tried my best to not let myself have those thoughts. Now that I'm so close to getting my fantasy, my body is about to explode with need, wanting to make up for lost time. As turned on as I am, I'm also a bit nervous because I'm lacking any experience.

Knox is amazing with his mouth. That has to mean he's good in bed as well. I'm sure he knows what he's doing. That thought dampens my mood a bit, but I push it to the side as best I can. Now is not the time to be thinking about his past hookups. Merry didn't even have any information on the girls he's been with, but maybe that's a good thing. I can't think about anyone else. Nope. I need to focus on the here and now. I know a girl's first time can be a bit painful, but I have no doubt Knox will make it good for me.

The second the car is in park, Knox is out and coming around to open my door. He grabs me, pulling me into his arms. I wrap myself around him, taking his mouth in a kiss. I don't know how he does it, but before I know it we're in the house and in his bedroom. I expect him to take me over to the bed, but he doesn't. He sits me down on his dresser instead.

He peers into my eyes. "Something is on your mind. I felt your mood shift in the car. You did it before we left the house tonight, too." Damn.

Knox must pay closer attention to me than I thought.

"I'm a virgin," I blurt out.

"Good. Not that it would change anything." His hands come down on either side of the dresser, caging me in. "I'll be the only man to know this body, and I promise I'll make this good for you. I don't know if this is going to hurt you, but I promise I'll take any pain away."

"Never been with a virgin?" I try to keep my tone neutral, but I know I fail in my attempt so I keep going. Why stop now? "The girls in high school were all trying to give theirs to you." I recall a few actually saying that verbatim. I used to hate listening to them talk about it.

"Have you ever heard about me being with someone?" He stares down at me, actually looking pissed.

"No. I mean, people said you only dated college girls." I roll my eyes then drop my chin to my chest. He lifts it until my eyes meet his.

“You’ve never heard about me being with anyone, because I’ve never *been* with anyone.”

I stare up at him. His words keep playing on a loop in my head because I must have heard him wrong.

“I’m a virgin, Red.”

“How?” I finally say.

“You, babe. You ruined me a long time ago. I never settle for less than I want, and I’ve always wanted you.”

“Knox,” I whisper, shocked.

“Don’t be scared. I’m going to do this right for you. I vowed long ago I’d never hurt you again. Even if it meant letting you go.”

I have so many freaking questions, but right now I want Knox inside of me. Everything else can take a number. We’ve waited long enough for this part.

I grab his shirt and yank him down to kiss me. He claims my mouth, lifting me off the dresser and taking me over to the bed. He only releases my mouth long enough for us to pull our clothes from each other until we’re both naked.

“I don’t think...” I trail off and stare at his cock. One thing is for sure: Knox is very proportionate. His dick is as big as the rest of him. Cum leaks from the head. I lick my lips, wondering what he tastes like.

“Red.” He groans. “If your mouth gets near my cock, I’ll lose it.”

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. It makes me feel damn sexy that his control is being tested right now. I’ve never felt hotter in my life. I ruined Knox Lovejoy. He’s worried he’s going to come too soon because of *me*. This is what being powerful feels like, and I’m drunk on it.

“You’re killing me, Red.” He grabs me, tossing me easily to the center of the bed.

I let out a small scream. Before I can move, he’s all over me. He buries his face between my thighs. He feasts on me, loving how wet and turned on I am for him. He works one finger into me and then another. I understand the

worry about coming too soon with how primed I already am for him.

I cry out his name when he hooks his finger inside me. The orgasm catches me off guard with how fast it comes. He doesn't stop, though. He works a third inside, stretching me more open for him.

"Knox," I whimper when I feel another orgasm building. How can I be about to come again? He growls against my clit before sucking it into his mouth. His tongue flicks back and forth. The orgasm pushes down on me, but he lifts his mouth suddenly, stopping it in its tracks. "Knox!"

"I've got you, Red." He slips up my body, taking my mouth in a possessive kiss. I moan, tasting myself on him.

His cock goes right to my opening, the head slipping in. I gasp into his mouth. My sex clenches around his cock, wanting more. His hand slips between us. His fingers go to my clit as he takes shallow thrusts in and out of me. The orgasm comes rushing back to the surface.

"You're so damn tight. Saved it all for me, didn't you? You always knew it belonged to me. That I was meant for you." His jaw clenches. I know he's fighting not to come already. His fingers work faster. I'm going to come.

"Oh God." I lift my hips, trying to get more of him inside me.

"It's Knox, babe. You say my name when I'm inside you," he orders.

"Knox!" I cry out as I come. This one is so much different than the others. He thrusts all the way inside. My hands fly to his shoulders, my nails digging into him. A low groan rumbles through him. Warmth spills deep inside of me. I'm pretty sure he came, but somehow he's still hard. I close my eyes. My body has no idea how to handle everything I'm feeling.

Knox starts to press kisses softly all over my face before ending on my mouth. I part my lips, letting his tongue slip in. "So damn perfect," he says between kisses. "The wait was worth every damn second. Even though it was torture. I'd wait my whole life."

The sweet words that come from him have me questioning if the few tears that escape me are from the pain. I start to kiss him back. Soon my hips try to move, but I'm pinned under him.

I'm pinned under Knox Lovejoy in the center of his bed. No other woman has had this. At this moment, he's all mine. A whimper of need comes from me.

He slowly pulls out. My eyes fly open when he thrusts all the way back inside me. He freezes. "No! Don't stop, please. I need you."

"You beg pretty, but you never need to beg me. Not for this." He pulls out and thrusts in again.

"Yes!"

He begins to move faster. I lift my hips, trying to match his pace, loving the way our bodies fit perfectly together. I never even imagined sex would be like this.

"Damn, fuck, I'm going to come again," he grits out.

"Come inside me," I encourage. I want to feel it again.

"Not without you." His hand slips between us. His fingers go to my clit. "Need you with me. Are you with me, Red?"

"Yes, I'm with you." I never want to be anywhere else.

"Forever," he growls.

"Forever!" I cry out as Knox pulls another orgasm from me. It explodes through me unlike any of the others. This time I'm connected to him in the most intimate of ways. All my walls have come down. Warmth fills my whole body, and I know it's love.

I'm hopelessly in love with Knox. I think ... I think maybe I always have been.

I thought I came home yesterday, but as I lie under Knox after him making love to me, I realize this is actually my home.

KNOX

“*Y*ou want me to buy out the whole store?” Olin asks.

I can feel him frowning on the other end of the line. “She loves the pumpkin marshmallow scents, so get all the candles they have like that.”

“This place is full of middle-aged women who treat this store like it’s a blood sport, and you want me to take *all* of a certain scent of candle?”

I can’t help but smile. “Yes.”

“Boss—” He grunts. “Hey, lady! Watch it! I’m shopping here.”

I hear an irate woman in the background.

“Oh, shit. I gotta go.” Olin hangs up, and I can only imagine him getting beaten with an umbrella by a soccer mom.

“What’s going on?” Ruby leans on the bakery counter.

I pull her to me and steal a kiss. Several, in fact. She’s been in town for just a week, but it’s been the best week of my life. With her here, I get the feeling I’m going to have a lot of those.

“We’ve got more orders, you little front desk floozy,” Lorraine calls from the back.

Ruby pulls away and rolls her eyes. “She loves you. You know that, right?”

“Yes.” I kiss her again as my phone buzzes in my pocket. I ignore it. “And I love this little ‘front desk floozy.’” I reach down and grab her ass, kneading it as she moans into my mouth.

Lorraine grumbles in the background, but I can’t get enough of Ruby. I never will.

“Fine.” She sighs against my mouth and wriggles so I’ll let her go.

I don’t like it, but Lorraine does rule the roost around here. “I guess I should get to the shop.”

“It’s always work, work, work around here. I come back from the busy city to visit, and all I get is a pile of work to do.” She smiles.

I smile back and drop another kiss on her before I grab her shoulders and turn her around, then give her a pop on the ass before she disappears into the kitchen. She and Lorraine start play-bickering over icing colors as I stand at the counter. Ruby’s words bounce around in my mind—she said she’s here “to visit.” I thought I’d changed her mind about that by now. That she was ready to stay.

But that’s not what she said. I guess we haven’t really sat down to discuss it. I just assumed she’d want to be here with me. Hell, I already have a friend in the city designing her engagement ring. The center is a giant ruby, obviously.

But what if she wants to go back there? To that asshole boss and that shitty job and that jerk of a roommate? What if I’m not enough to keep her here?

Shit. I run a hand through my hair. My phone buzzes again.

I reach for it and check. It’s my father. I’m not in the mood for his brand of crazy, but maybe a distraction right now would be a good thing.

“Yeah?” I answer.

“That’s how you pick up the phone? ‘Yeah’? Did I raise a hooligan? Mr. Finley, I do believe I raised a hooligan!”

“Yes, sir,” Mr. Finley agrees with his usual tone of tired and bored.

“Come to the house, Knox. I need to speak with you.”

“That’s what phones are for, Dad. We can speak right now. Actually, we *are* speaking. See how that works?”

“A hooligan and a smartass. That’s what I have. Not a son. Right, Mr. Finley?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Dad, just tell me what you need.” I head out of the bakery and pull my coat tight against the snow. My shop is only a few blocks away, but damn the wind is killer out here. Christmas is only a few days away, and it’s going to be a cold and snowy one. Greasy trots up from a side alley, and I scoop him up with my free arm and tuck him close to me.

“Look here, son. Well, I called you because Because ... Wait, Mr. Finley, why did I—”

“The woman, sir.”

“The woman!” my father bellows. “Yes. I have a question. What I need is the truth from you. I’ve heard talk. Apparently, the little town down there is buzzing about you and Lorraine’s granddaughter.”

I wait for a question. And wait. And then when I suspect my father’s fallen asleep, I clear my throat.

“Are you seeing Lorraine’s granddaughter?”

“Seeing? I guess you could say that.”

Greasy headbutts me on the chin. I kiss him on the top of the head, then drop him onto the hood of the TransAm as I walk into the shop.

“So it’s just a dalliance?” He sounds relieved.

“No. I’ve already asked Justin to make her engagement ring. If she’ll have me, Ruby will be my wife.” And if she won’t have me, I’ll hold her down and give her orgasms until she agrees—but my father doesn’t need to know that.

“Wife? Mr. Finley, I think I’m hallucinating.”

“Congratulations, young Mr. Lovejoy,” Mr. Finley calls.

I smile and grab a socket wrench. “Thanks, Mr. Finley.”

My father stutters, gasps, and then starts a yelling tirade that I think the entire town might hear. He’s on a roll, cussing, speaking French for some reason—all of it.

When he finally stops to take a breath, I say, “Dad, I don’t need your blessing. She’s the one. But I think once you meet her, you’ll see why.”

He starts again, bluster and foolishness raining from his lips. I end the call and shake my head. I love the old man, but he can be so damn difficult sometimes. Stubborn.

Then again, I’ve been pining over the same woman for years, so maybe it runs in the family. Now that I have her, I hope she knows that what we have is real. I’ll prove it to her day by day until she’s ready to come back home to Reindeer Valley and to me.

Ruby belongs here. I just have to make sure she realizes we aren’t some short-term affair while she’s in town. That’s not what this is. This is love. The real thing.

Ruby and I aren’t just a holiday fling.

We’re forever.

RUBY

“*I* think it’s time for you to head home,” I hear Grams say from behind me. I doodle a Christmas tree onto the gift card of one of the orders about to go out. “Ruby, did you hear me?”

I pop the card into the little envelope before I turn around to face her. “Were you talking to me?” I thought she was speaking to Olivia, who’s elbow deep in icing at the moment.

“Yes. It’s time for you to head out.” She walks over and pulls the string on my apron. “Go home.”

“Wait, what?” I’m so confused as to why she’s suddenly changed her mind and wants me to go back to the city. I was planning to stay until after the holidays at least. I know I need to go back at some point, but in the back of my mind, that would only be to pack up my things and come right back here. Especially after our chat the other day.

“You’ve been working like crazy, and I’ve got extra hands tonight. Good ones. Not those silly birds who couldn’t tell a spatula from a spoon. Olivia is a godsend. Anyway, go spend the evening with your man.”

“Oh.” Relief fills me. Why do I let my mind always go to the worst places? It’s because I keep waiting for the bad to come. It always does. Everything has been a bit too good to be true. Especially when it comes to Knox.

“Still can’t believe someone finally landed Knox Lovejoy.” Olivia lets out a dreamy sigh. She’s adorable with her wavy blond hair and dimples.

I'd be irritated at how gorgeous she is if I hadn't already met her girlfriend, who is just as adorable as her. Olivia is a hopeless romantic. She spent most of the afternoon telling me about her favorite romance novels. I loved every second of it. She's so much cooler than any of the girls I worked with back in the city.

"I knew the whispers about him and Nora were bullcrap. Besides, the rumors that he's been waiting years for you to come back home are way sweeter."

"He's a sweet man," I say.

If you had told me I was going to utter those words a few months ago, I probably would have thought you were completely insane. I never would have believed you. Hell, it's hard to believe a lot of the things Knox told me last night, but he had no reason to lie.

"Ruby, you have a visitor," Jamie says, poking her head into the back. I immediately smile, thinking it's Knox. "It's Mr. Lovejoy." Jamie's words take me by surprise.

"The old one?" I try to remain calm and keep the smile on my face, but inside I'm anything but.

"Yep. Crabby, too." She comes into the kitchen, clearly ready for me to handle it.

"Didn't know Abner ever left his throne," Grams says dryly.

"He's looking for me?" I point to myself, making sure I heard her right. Jamie nods.

My anxiety grows at her confirmation. I know Knox's parents are snotty. His mom was, especially. Even with all the sweet things Knox has said to me, my mind still goes back to high school.

Years ago, when I was a sophomore and Knox was a senior, we shared a moment, and he'd even given me his number and told me to call him. I'd actually planned to. In that small interaction we had that day, I thought I saw a different side to him. That maybe all those times I'd thought he'd been staring at me weren't a figment of my imagination.

Up until that point, I'd always told myself I was crazy. That there was no way Knox Lovejoy was into me. But our little interaction that day had me thinking something else entirely.

All of it had been crushed moments later, though. I'd been on cloud nine when I walked away with his number programmed into my phone. So much so that I went the wrong way. I had been in a bit of shock that he gave me his number since he never gave it out to any girls at school.

Once I realized I'd been headed down the wrong hall, I turned around. When I passed him, I overheard him talking to Todd who asked why we were talking. He told him it was because he needed to place an order at the bakery for his dad's birthday. Todd wasn't satisfied with that answer and had pushed more, asking Knox if he was interested in me. Knox had gone on to say his mom and dad would never approve of me. That Todd should stay away from me too, because his parents would think the same.

I snap back to the present. His father is waiting out front.

"Okay." I take a deep breath before I rush over to the mirror above the sink we use to wash our hands. I give myself a once-over. I grab a paper towel to wipe some flour off my cheek.

"Don't you dare." Grams comes up behind me, glaring at me in the mirror.

"What?"

"You're out of Knox's league. Not the other way around."

"Hey, no one is out of anyone's league."

"Then remember that," she orders, grabbing my elbow and pulling me into the front of the bakery. Mr. Lovejoy turns at the sound of the door swinging open. He pays me no mind, his eyes going straight for Grams. "What do you want with my granddaughter, Abner?"

He opens his mouth and closes it.

"Well? Cat got your tongue or something?"

"I came to tell her to stay away from my son," he finally says.

Grams bursts into laughter. I wish I could laugh along with her.

“When did you grow a set of balls?”

Mr. Lovejoy tries to speak again, but Grams keeps cutting him off. “God knows you didn’t have them when you married Georgina.”

I’m not sure what the heck is going on here, but I know this isn’t good.

“Let’s all calm down.” I try to step in. Knox’s father might be a jerk, but I’m pretty sure I’m in love with Knox, so he’s going to be in my life one way or another.

“He can’t marry her!” Mr. Lovejoy suddenly shouts. “That would make things particularly odd.” He mumbles the last part. I think it’s only meant for himself.

“Sweetheart. Like I said. You need to head on out of here.” Grams gives me a smile so sweet it scares the hell out of me and makes me worry for Mr. Lovejoy’s safety.

“Don’t kill anyone,” I whisper to Grams before I duck the hell out of there. It might be terrible of me to leave Grams to deal with it, but I don’t want to make things worse between Knox’s father and me. I can’t believe he came all the way down here to tell me to stay away from his son. I shake my head.

Since I’m out earlier than I told Knox, I head toward his shop. I’m going to have to tell him about his father. For a moment I worry over it, but then I remind myself that Knox isn’t the same person he was all those years ago.

I know the kind of control parents can have over you. I remember thinking if I made good grades and never got in trouble, when my mom came back she might see that I was a good kid and maybe she’d love me. That she would realize I wasn’t a hard kid to raise.

It was foolish in hindsight, but at that age it’s hard to understand why your mom doesn’t love you the same as other kids’ parents loved them.

It’s a short walk to Knox’s garage. The sign on the front is turned to ‘closed,’ but when I push the door, it opens. I step inside and think it’s going to be a dirty garage, but it’s not. The front area is nice with leather chairs and TVs on

the wall. Off to the side is even a coffee area and baked goods I know all too well. I can't help but smile.

Knox thinks he's clever, but I'm putting together that he's the one that's been placing a bunch of orders to Grams' bakery. It's sweet. I follow the sound of music, wondering what the heck he's listening to. The song is playing low and sounds seductive. I try not to judge. I do love Taylor Swift and some Britney Spears.

I don't make it to the door to go into the garage. Glass windows give me a clear view. My stomach drops when I see Nora practically naked and laid out on the hood of some cherry red sports car. There is no missing Knox standing in front of the car. Nora's eyes lock with mine through the window as she slips down the hood gracefully and onto her knees right in front of him. I instantly feel sick to my stomach at the sight.

Not wanting to see another second, I turn and bolt back out the front door. I pull my phone out of my purse and text Merry, telling her I need her. Like a good friend, she doesn't ask a bunch of questions. She only responds that she's on her way. The questions will come later.

I rush back to Knox's house, thankful he'd given me a damn key. I told him I didn't need it, but Knox did his pushy sweet crap, and I caved. I've been caving since the second he picked me up from the airport. The man has always had a way with me. It's why I left town all those years ago. It was the only option. I always let myself fall right into him even when I knew I shouldn't.

How did I fall for this? Hell, he might not have been going to do anything with Nora, but why was she even there? She's been coming on to him since I came into town. This can't be new. He should have shut it down long ago unless he enjoys the attention or something.

Running around his house, I grab my crap as fast as I can. The fact that Knox had already unpacked all of my stuff doesn't make it easy. The amount of my things around makes it look as though I've moved in already. But this isn't my home. He's even got Grams calling this place my home. He really is smooth. Or maybe I'm just gullible.

Unable to find my laptop, I check his office to see he has it all set up for me with a desk right next to his. I don't know why I do it, but I click his computer, and the screen comes on. A password login comes up. I type in the same one he told me for the alarm code. It works, his emails showing on the screen.

This must be that woman's intuition shit or something because right there is an email with my boss's name on it. I click it, a gasp leaving me when I see pictures of my boss. He's rocking two black eyes and his nose is taped up.

Knox,

It's done. Got her a nice severance package too. That's on the house. This fucker had it coming.

F

I think I'm in shock when I put it all together. Knox *paid* to have the crap beat out of my boss. That really should freak me out, but a stupid smile pulls at my lips as warmth fills my chest. Irritated with myself, I click the emails down. I should leave now, but I don't. My eyes drift over the desktop and pause when I see a folder named RED. I click it.

Hundreds or maybe thousands of pictures of me flood the screen. I scroll down, scanning through them quickly, knowing I might be running out of time. When Knox picks me up, he's always freshly showered, so he must come home before he gets me from the bakery.

Cheaters shower before they see their wives.

I close my eyes at that thought, taking a calming breath. I'm not going to let myself cry. Not yet at least. I get it together the best I can and keep scrolling through the pictures. They go back all the way to high school.

I open a few documents to find papers I'd written in college. Nothing important, just homework and such. What is all of this and why does he have it? How the hell did he get it?

I scream like a dork when my phone goes off. I check it to see it's a text from Merry telling me she's here. I grab my laptop and leave his office. I toss my key onto the kitchen counter before I pull my luggage out the front door.

Merry jumps out of a giant fancy SUV to open the back for me.

“What is this?” I ask as she helps me get my bags into the back.

“My new boss’s ride.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“You got the job?”

“Yep!” she chirps happily. No one has had more jobs than Merry. She’s terrible at keeping them, but she tries her best. God love her. “Get in. Wait till you see his digs.” She slams the back door of the SUV that might actually weigh more than she does. I go around and get into the passenger seat. Merry has to practically crawl to get up into the driver’s seat. If I wasn’t so upset right now, I’d be dying with laughter about the effort it takes her to get into this monstrosity.

“You can take me anywhere. Just go.”

“That bad?” she asks and puts the SUV into reverse.

“You have no idea.” I actually have no clue how I feel right now. Everything is jumbled inside me. The SUV starts to make a loud beeping sound.

“Merry!” I shout when I look at the screen on her dashboard and realize she’s about to back into the mailbox, but it’s too late.

“Oh shit!” I gasp as she runs right over it. Her phone starts to ring.

“Mr. Grumpy is calling,” the SUV announces over the speakers. Merry clears it.

“Okay, maybe we won’t go to see my new boss’s digs,” she says as her phone starts ringing again. Mr. Grumpy Pants is clearly not giving up.

Even though I’m upset, I can’t help but burst into laughter. “Just get me out of here,” I manage to get out as the tears rolled down my face. I’m not sure if they are from mirth or sadness. I think it’s a mix of both.

That shoe I’m always waiting to drop finally has. And once again, I find myself running away from Knox.

KNOX

“*B*loody Nora.” I roll my eyes and step back from her grasping claws. “What the fuck is this?”

“It’s time for you to admit you want me.” She bats her lashes at me, trying to give off ‘sexy’ but looking more like ‘something’s in my eye.’

“What I want is for you to get the hell out of my shop.” I point to the bay door. Greasy winds around my ankles, clearly pissed Nora took his spot on the car.

“Knox.” She stands and puts her hands on her hips.

I don’t look at her. I’ve seen as much of Nora as anyone should have to.

“Where are your clothes? You know what? Doesn’t matter. Get out.”

“I thought you were playing coy with me for years.” She prances closer.

“Stop.” I hold a hand out.

“But when that dull girl from high school came back to town, you really pulled out all the stops. Acting like you were dating Ruby just to make me jealous.”

“Ruby is far from dull, not that you’d ever realize it. You barely have fluff between your ears. But that doesn’t matter. I love Ruby. I don’t want you and never have. I can’t make it any clearer.”

“Still playing coy.” She giggles in a high-pitched, little girl tone and takes another step.

“I’m warning you, Nora. Stop.”

She shrugs. “And what if I don’t?”

“Nora, don’t—”

She takes another step, but this time her high-heeled foot hits only air. She lands in the pit with a thunk and the sound of a dozen wrenches tumbling onto the concrete floor.

“I told you to stop.” I sigh and peer over the edge at her.

“Ow!” She sits up right as an oil can tips over and douses her. “What is—no!”

“Son?”

I whirl to find my dad behind me. “What are you doing here?”

“Help me!” Nora screeches.

“Is that Ruby?” He blinks.

“No.”

“That idiot is long gone. Now help me out of out here!”

“If you say another bad word about Ruby, I’ll strike a fucking match, Nora.”

Dad’s eyes widen.

Nora’s screeches turn to sobs.

My phone buzzes.

“Nora was just leaving.” I stride to my office. “What can I do for you, Dad?”

“Lorraine still has that figure. Still so ... so spicy. You get me?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“You came all the way to my shop to tell me about Lorraine?”

“No.” He scoffs. “I came to tell that granddaughter of hers to leave you alone, that you aren’t meant for the likes of h—”

“If I have to knock your block off, Abner Lovejoy, I will.” Lorraine storms into my office. “Ruby loves your son. And he loves her. And if you’d spend more time with other people instead of locked up in your stupid mansion, you’d know that.”

“See?” Dad smiles. “Spicy.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Back up. You talked to Ruby?”

“He *insulted* Ruby. I told her to leave before he could get started with his bluster and foolishness, and I thought she’d have come here.” She glances around and sees Nora as she climbs from the pit, covered in oil, and still sniffing. “What is that?”

“Nothing. Where’s Ruby?” My phone buzzes again. I pull it out and see three security notifications. Ruby’s been at the house, on my computer, and now she’s gone. Shit.

“I have to go.” I grab my keys and sprint out of the shop as my dad calls after me.

“Quiet down, old man.” Lorraine snaps over him.

“Spicy!” He laughs.

I don’t have time for him. I don’t have time for anyone except Ruby. If the feeling in my gut is any indication, she must’ve heard enough from my father and seen enough from that idiot Nora to draw all the wrong conclusions. And if she dug around in my computer? I swallow hard. Yeah, I have a lot of explaining to do.

It’s snowing when I whip into the street and gun it the few blocks to my house. When I get there, my mailbox is destroyed, and a black SUV is pulling away.

Tension forms a ball in my gut as I tear off after the SUV. Ruby’s been taken. But what moron would dare try to take her from me? My mind flips through a million culprits—her pervy boss, Todd, some guy in the bakery who I noticed

lingered a little too long. Each name has me gripping the steering wheel tighter.

I have to stop them. A side swipe should do it. Then again, the driver isn't a professional. In fact, they're going slower than Grams on Sunday morning. What the fuck is happening?

When the SUV slows as it comes to a stop sign, I pull up beside it.

A wave of relief hits me when I see Merry behind the wheel and Ruby in the passenger seat. I quickly pull in front of them and kill the engine.

When I get out, Merry's eyes go wide, and Ruby tries to stare daggers at me. It doesn't work, though, because I can see the tears on her cheeks.

I go to her window. "Red."

She looks at me through the dark tint.

"Red, come on."

She shakes her head.

Merry leans over and whispers something to her.

I raise my voice. "Merry, I swear to the ghost of Christmas Future that I will chase you until you run out of gas if you so much as think about trying to bail."

She leans back into her seat with a chastised look on her face. Good.

I focus all my attention on Ruby. "Red, please. I can explain."

"You can explain your father and what you said in high school and the stuff on your computer and *Nora*?" The last word is a yell.

"Yes." I press my forehead to the cold glass. "But can we do this back at home?" I know it's a huge risk to ask this, especially when I'm almost certain she's already packed her things and was having Merry drive her to the airport. Just the thought is like an arrow through my heart. Ruby can't leave. Not when I've finally brought her home.

"Home?" She wipes her nose.

“Home. Remember the little Christmas house with the pink lights? The ones you like so much?”

“You knew.”

“Yes. I kept tabs on you. I couldn’t help myself. I’ll tell you everything. Just come back home with me. Please, Red. Trust me.”

She stares at me for a long moment, and for a split-second I think she might turn her back on me.

But she doesn’t. She opens her door and hops out.

“Merry, the back.” I jerk my chin.

“Yep, okay, yes. On it.” She presses a variety of buttons until she finds the one for the back hatch release.

I grab Ruby’s bag and stuff it into my back seat then help her into the front.

When I get back in the car, my heart can beat again. I have Ruby. She’s not in danger. Though she is livid at me. I can deal with that as long as she’s safe.

She crosses her arms over her chest and stares straight ahead as I drive us back home. “Explain.”

“Nora’s a dumbass. I didn’t know she was at the shop, much less that she was going to pull that stunt.” I shake my head.

“You promise?” She sniffs.

“Yes.” I take her hand, and I’m relieved when she doesn’t pull away. “She’s jealous of you. Always has been.”

She snorts.

“You don’t believe me?” I squeeze her fingers. “Why do you think she was always talking shit about you? Why did she feel so threatened when you came back to town? Come on, Red. You’re a smart woman. You have to see it. She’s jealous.”

She chews her bottom lip for a second. “Okay, that actually makes sense—not that I’m saying I agree, but go on. What about your dad?”

“What he thinks doesn’t matter to me. Only what you think matters, Ruby. I swear. If he told me today he’s going to disinherit me if I stay with you, I’d be perfectly fine with it as long as I had you.”

She finally looks at me, her eyes watering. “You mean it?”

“Every word.” I kiss the back of her hand. “The shit I said in high school was just that, shit. That moment we had—it was everything. I was an asshole back then, but I think my soul recognized yours all the same. Even then. Everything you heard me say after that—to Todd or Nora or whoever—was to keep you all to myself, to keep you safe. Todd was a douche, and Nora, well, she hasn’t changed.”

A ghost of a smile crosses her lips before she frowns again. “What was all that stuff on your computer? Photos of me. You had someone beat up my boss?”

I pull up at our house and avoid the busted mailbox to park. “Yes. When you left, I realized I’d been a prick. But I couldn’t just come to you and say that. Words aren’t shit. I had to prove it. So I decided to be someone you could be proud of. I worked hard to start my shop and help around town. And, yeah, I watched you. I couldn’t help myself. I had to know you were safe at school and then in the city.”

“Stalker,” she mutters under her breath. Then she arches a brow. “Okay, but tell me the truth. Did you place all those orders that had Grams calling me to come home?”

“I’ll always tell you the truth, Ruby. Always. And ... Yes. I had Olin place hundreds of orders. Then when they were filled, I took the cookies and cakes all around town and next door, and even sent some off to the city for food banks and shelters. Lorraine is more famous than she realizes at this point. I’m sorry about the deception.” I fall silent and try to read her face.

She stares at the house, her forehead wrinkled in concentration. It’s like she’s going through everything I just said and trying to find holes.

After what seems like an eternity, she nods. “Okay. I want to believe you, and I want to forgive you, but I’m going to need more convincing.”

Fuck. I laid all my cards out. I have nothing left.

She turns to me, grabs my shirt, and pulls me to her. “The convincing will need to happen in the bedroom.”

My heart leaps, and I can’t help but smirk. “Yes, ma’am.”

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RUBY

“*K*nox.” I moan, shaking my head. I’m not sure I can take another orgasm. The man is relentless with that mouth of his. He has been since the night he laid it all out for me. Even got me to agree that night that I would be moving back home. Said if I didn’t that he’d be following after me. I didn’t really have to think it over. My heart has always been here. It was time for me to come home. “Please, Knox.” I start to beg him.

My fingers wrap around the silk straps that have me tied to the bed. I can’t believe he’s kept them on me all night. Okay, I actually can.

I’m not sure if this is because of my naughty joke about Santa from last night or if he’s still working on *convincing* me to believe and forgive him. I’d jokingly told him he would have to do those things in the bedroom. I think I might need to stop with the teasing all around. Knox obviously doesn’t have a sense of humor when it comes to these things.

I’d gotten these straps put on me last night when I’d made a joke about being on Santa’s naughty list and how he might make me pay to get off of it. Knox hadn’t found it funny in the least. I’d ended up tied to the bed with him having his way with me. It’s how I’d spent my Christmas Eve and now my Christmas morning. I have to admit, it’s a great way to celebrate the holidays.

“This one is all for me.” He nips at the inside of my thigh before he starts to move that mouth up my body. “Getting my Christmas treat. While I enjoy your cookie. God, I love your pussy.”

“Knox!” I gasp.

“And you love my dirty mouth. Don’t even try to deny it.” He kisses me to prove his point.

I get lost in his kiss, knowing no other man would ever kiss me the way he does. He pours everything into it, as if he may never get to kiss me again. Or maybe he’s trying to make up for all the ones we’d lost over the years. Whatever the reason, I love every damn second of it. I think the few years I was away from Reindeer Valley were good for the both of us. We got a bit of time to grow on our own. To realize what we both really want and need in our lives: each other.

His knees spread my thighs farther apart, making room for himself before thrusting all the way inside. I let out a gasp. It’s still a tight fit even with us making love multiple times a day. He frees me of my binds at some point as he starts to move in and out of me. I stop hanging on to the straps and cling to him, knowing I never have to let him go. He’s all mine.

“Need to be deeper,” he growls.

In one quick move, he pulls out, flipping me over onto my knees. He grabs my hips, keeping my ass in the air and thrusts all the way back inside me. I grip the sheet in a tight hold as Knox starts to lose control.

He takes me hard, and I love every second of it. I push back into him, only encouraging it more. He’s always trying to be gentle and sweet with me. I love when he gets lost inside of me. When he’s mindless with wanting to fuck me as hard as he can.

“Red, need you with me.” His hand comes down on my ass in a slap, making me moan. As sweet as he can be, Knox has a dirty rough side to him too. He rubs the spot before he slips his fingers down between my thighs. He continues pumping in and out of me as his fingers find my overly sensitive clit.

“I’m always with you, Knox. Always.” I drop my head forward. My eyes catch on something shiny on my finger. I shake my head, not believing what I’m seeing.

“Then give it to me.” He rolls my clit between his fingers, causing my sex to lock down around his cock as I come. He groans my name as he spills deep inside me. I whimper, loving the sensation, but more than anything, I love what it could mean.

My body gives out. I collapse back onto the bed. Knox falls right next to me. He pulls me into his arms, wrapping his big body around mine. I sigh happily, opening my eyes to get a better look at the ring on my finger. Knox nibbles at my neck. His cock jerks inside me as he rests his hand on my stomach.

I notice him doing that a lot lately. Neither of us have talked about all the unprotected sex we’ve been having. We both know what it’s going to mean eventually. I wonder if he thinks the same is going to happen with this ring on my finger. The ring is heavy. The giant ruby is more than perfect. No one is going to miss this thing. I’m sure that’s the point.

“You didn’t ask,” I finally say when I catch my breath.

“Did you think I would? Told you I’m done waiting. You’re mine.”

I turn my head to kiss him. “I want a winter wedding, so we better get a move on it or you’ll have to wait ‘til next year.”

“Good thing I’m rich and can give you any damn thing your heart desires.”

“Hey, it can be small.”

“I’m teasing you. If I had my way we’d have this wedding before the new year.”

I smile against his mouth, loving the fact that he’s in such a hurry to make me his wife. “I can’t wait to show Grams.” I wiggle out of the bed, heading straight for the shower. Knox is hot on my heels. “You can’t join me. I’m trying to get to Grams to show her my ring so we can start wedding plans.” I’m already about to burst with excitement.

Grams and I have already been making all kinds of plans. More to do with me moving back to town and opening my own little marketing company. I figured I could have a few clients and keep helping her out in the bakery. Working there these past few weeks has fulfilled me more than any of the

time I spent at my fancy marketing job in the city. I hated every second of it. It was so impersonal and not me.

“We’re not going to Grams’,” he says, ignoring me and stepping right into the shower with me.

“She’s coming here? I don’t want her driving in this weather.”

“I’d never let her drive in this. We’re doing Christmas at my father’s. Grams is already there. Then we have Merry’s thing tonight,” he reminds me.

“Wait. Grams is at your dad’s?” I don’t think I could be more shocked if I tried.

I know Abner has been hanging around the bakery a lot. He’s smitten with Grams, but she hasn’t been giving him a chance. She really has been making the man work for it. Did he finally crack her? It’s been cute watching the two of them spar. I’m not the least bit mad at Abner. If anything, I’m a bit sad for him. It must be lonely to go your whole life and never know true love.

He’s been extra sweet to me since Knox made it clear he would always pick me. Told him to pull his head out of his ass if he wanted to have a family and know his grandkids. Abner might not have loved his wife, but he does love Knox. I truly believe that whatever he’s done in regards to Knox was because he wanted what he thought was best for him.

“She’s got him running around and getting the place Christmas ready. Wait till you see it.” He turns me in his arms. The warm water sprays over the two of us. “You’re always sexy, Red, but you in only my ring? Fantasy fuel.” His hard cock presses into my stomach.

“How are you still hard?” I laugh.

“Your fault. You’ve always done this to me. Only you.” He leans down, pressing his mouth against mine.

“I love you, Knox.” I wrap my arms around him, not caring if we’re late. The rest of the world can wait. We’ve waited long enough.

“Love you too, Red,” he says between kisses.

I thought for so long Knox was only a crush, but a crush you can get over. He was never that. He was always the boy I loved. Now he's the man I'll love forever.

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EPILOGUE

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KNOX

A giggle sounds from under the stairs. Dad comes creeping from the sitting room, his Santa hat with the bell on the end jingling softly.

Another giggle.

He winks at me and eases over to the small closet. “Mr. Finley, I do believe we have a mouse,” he announces.

Mr. Finley appears from the office, a tired but slightly amused look on his face. “A Christmas mouse?”

Giggle.

“One with big brown eyes and a penchant for mischief,” Dad announces.

The entire house is decked out in Christmas finery. Walls with swags of greenery and red bows, the stair railing draped with ribbon and garland, and mistletoe over every door. This old mansion has had a new life ever since Lorraine moved in.

“They’ve been playing all morning,” Ruby whispers as she comes up behind me.

I tuck her under my arm. “I swear it’s like Dad gets younger every year.”

“That’s Grams’ doing.” Ruby rolls her eyes with a smile. “Like teenagers, those two.”

“The thing about mice, Mr. Finley, is that they love cheese!” Dad leans against the wall by the closet door. “I happen to have a whole bunch of it in the kitchen already set out on a fancy tray.”

“Ready to eat,” agrees Mr. Finley.

“Cheese and a cup of hot cocoa.”

The giggles get louder, then the door pops open. Emerald emerges, her curls bouncing as she jumps into Dad’s arms.

“Grampy!” Emmy’s three-year-old glee is infectious. Dad laughs as he carries her off through the hall toward the kitchen, Mr. Finley trailing behind them.

Ruby sighs contentedly and rubs her swollen belly. “He’s spoiled her so badly. There are more presents hidden in the attic than I’ve ever seen in my life.”

I kiss her crown. “Wait ‘til our son gets here. It’ll be double.”

“Too much. No way we can fit all this into our house.” She shakes her head.

“That’s the beauty of leaving most of it here. The kids can always play with Grampy while you and I get cozy at home.” I step in front of her and lean down, claiming her mouth in a kiss.

She wraps her arms around my neck, her sweet taste like the cherry on top of a sundae.

I sway her gently, dancing to the low Christmas music playing throughout the house.

She pulls back and looks up at me, her big eyes holding my entire world. They always have.

“Did you ask Santa for anything special this year?” she asks.

“No. I already have everything I need.” I kiss the tip of her nose. “You?”

She shrugs. “I was thinking maybe I was on the naughty list again.” Her eyes twinkle. “And maybe I need to do him some favors if I want to get off—” She yelps as I sweep her into my arms.

“That’s it, Red.”

“What?” she asks innocently as I carry her to the library and slam the doors behind us. “I was just saying—”

“You were saying you intended to do some special favors for Santa.” It’s ridiculous, especially given the fact Santa isn’t real—or is he? What if Christmas magic is a thing—after all, it’s what brought Ruby and I back together.

I place her on the wide leather couch on her knees. “Hold on, Red.” I lift her dress and pull her panties to the side.

“Knox, you can’t just—”

With one solid thrust, I’m deep inside her, and she makes the hottest sound I’ve ever heard.

“I can’t what, Red?” I start a steady rhythm, giving her all of me. “I can’t fuck you right back onto the nice list?” I run my fingers through her hair and turn her head to the side so I can look into her eyes.

“Is that even a thing?”

“Now it is.” I lean over her, joined with her in every way, and kiss her sweet mouth.

She comes hard, her body already primed for me. This pregnancy has been especially sexy, her libido so high I love keeping up with her.

I give her a few more strokes and let myself go, my release filling her as I continue claiming her mouth. When she’s coming back down, I gently pull out and lay her down on her side. Scooting next to her, I pull her into my arms.

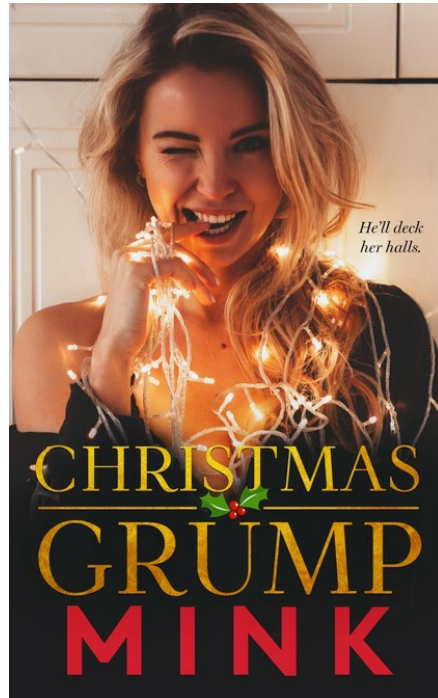
“I may be on the nice list now, but you definitely just got put onto the naughty.” She laughs.

“Fine by me. Like I said, I have everything I want.” I kiss her ear. “Merry Christmas, Ruby.”

She sighs dreamily and rests her head in the crook of my neck. “Merry Christmas, Knox.”



One more Christmas surprise awaits in Christmas Grump, coming soon!



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Plump

My city is at peace, the war between the bosses put to rest. I'm on top, but I still have to keep my eyes open for trouble. Trouble comes in the form of a runaway who takes a job dancing at my club. Thing is, she isn't meant for the stage. Diamond is meant *just* for me. She's got curves I want to sink my teeth into, and she's as innocent as she is sexy.

I love that about her, but I hate the men in her life who told her she wasn't beautiful, who told her she wasn't the right size or the right shape. **Everything** about my Diamond is perfect, and I'll spend the rest of my life proving it to her.

When I find out who she really is, that's when things get even more dangerous. But it doesn't matter, because Diamond is all mine. I'll go to war for her, and I'll happily destroy anyone who tries to take her from me—even her own father.

Obsessed Love

Prison didn't do me any favors. The moment I'm free, I start to put my plan for revenge in motion and hit the road back home. But then, a set of flashing blue lights in my rear view have me slowing down.
Stopping.

And then *she* walks up. Officer Lovett. I want her. So I steal her, snatch her right there off the side of the road and take her to my home. Like I said, prison did nothing to gentle my nature. In fact, I'm even more ruthless than I was before.

Now, nothing will stop me from getting revenge on my enemies. And no matter how hard she tries, Love won't stop me from claiming her in every way that matters.

Crazy Love

When I caught a glimpse of Bunny, I knew she was the one. From that chance meeting, I created an entire life just for her. She's right at home with me, both of us cuddling by a fire at our expansive cabin or going for a boat ride on our private lake.

She's so happy here with me ... Or, she *will* be. Once I kidnap her and bring her home, I'll show her how much she means to me. And when she realizes the lengths I'll go to just to make her happy, she'll see our love is real. Her mouthy cat notwithstanding, Bunny is everything I've ever wanted.

With Bunny, it's a fresh start for me. But maybe I should've kept a closer eye on my past, because when old business associates come calling, danger isn't far behind.

Claiming His Kitten

Alana is the heir to a fortune she doesn't even know about. But I do. I know it down to the very last penny, and I want it for myself. Problem is, I'm the one who created the security that keeps the fortune locked away. I should be able to break it, to undo the encryption. But I can't. Not alone.

I need Alana. I've watched her closely for the past few years. A woman with eyes that catch the sun and a heart a saint would envy. I have to get close to her. So I do. So close, in fact, that she thinks I'm her savior, her friend. I'm not, of course. All the time I spend watching her, talking to her, hanging on

her every word—that's all for show. Just for show, I remind myself. So why do I find myself more entangled in her than ever? So much so that I begin to think the real treasure has been right in front of me the whole time. . .

Vetting His Kitten

I don't have time for my mother's games or her menagerie of mammals, reptiles, and god knows what else. At least, I don't think I have time for them until I meet her trusted veterinarian, Amelia. Suddenly, it seems I'm extremely interested in the wellbeing of my mother's furry and scaly friends, so much so that I visit the vet's office on a daily basis. It's the least I can do for both my mother and the devoted vet.

Amelia is a sweet, caring woman with a big heart. I couldn't be more different. I'm a crow with killer instincts and a thirst for power. But even crows need care, don't they? Even a rough beast can find love in the heart of an innocent, tender beauty. I intend to take that love for myself, right along with everything else Amelia has to offer.

But when the truth about my ruthless life is exposed, will she see a wounded animal in need of her redeeming love or a predator that should be put down?

Wrecked

He knows how to fight, but can he learn to protect the one woman who's ever made him feel hope?

Nanny Tempts the Beast

She needs a job. He needs a nanny. And then he needs only *her*.

Unforgettable

Amnesia romance with a sassy kitty and a tantalizing mystery? What's more MINK than that?

Bodyguard's Obsession

He's supposed to protect her, but he ends up needing to stay *very* close to her. For, ya know, *safety*.
wink wink

His Clever Kitten

She takes him hostage to save her kitty cat shop. It just so happens he's a mafia boss who'll do anything to stay locked up tight just for her.

His to Keep

A bodyguard's work is never done, especially when he can't keep his eyes off his client.

119 Kitty Lane

MINK takes a trip to Cherry Falls in this sweet romance.

Santa Material

A big bear of a Santa and the handy woman he loves. Spoiler Alert: He's going to stuff her full of

Christmas cheer.

Taming His Bride

Book 4 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Stealing His Bride

Book 3 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Claiming His Bride

Book 2 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Knocking Up His Bride

Book 1 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Four brides, four rough men with a soft spot for the women they love.

Under His Spell

A haunted house, a ghost story of lost love, and a brand new love blooming under a full moon. This spooky sweet story is sure to get your blood racing for all the right reasons.

Beauty Tempts the Beast

Revenge is his life's work, but when he finds his Beauty in the heart of an enemy, will he be up for a career change?

Loan Shark's Obsession

He knows priceless objects when he sees them. So when he sees her, he *knows*.

His Stolen Bride

Her first husband never touched her. He's dead. Now she belongs to Santino, and there will be much, *much* touching.

His Stolen Princess

They were meant to be ... until they weren't. So, he steals her. Logical. Also, there's a cat.

Stalking Her Sweetly

Who's stalking whom?

Hitman's Heart

He's a badass who kills without remorse. She's a good girl who gets caught in the crosshairs. He saves her, but can he keep her?

His Secret Treasure

He says artifacts belong in a museum. She says he stole an ancient box that belongs to her. Can they come to terms over her box?

My Hero's Secret Baby

He's a hero to her, the boogeyman to everyone else. Can they have a future together?

His Tiger Queen

She's a princess in a heavily guarded tower. He's the prince next door. Did I mention there's also a pet tiger?

His Virgin Heiress

She's a thief. He keeps her safe. But can she give up jewel heists for love?

Cuffed Love

MINK's personal favorite. Seriously. I love this book.

Stuffed

Stuffies, hitmen, true love, and accidental homicide? MINK at her finest.

His Sweetest Sin

He's a priest, not a sinner ... Until he sees her.

Locking Her Down

She broke into an animal shelter. He's the only one who can help her, but this attorney knows what he wants in return (hint: it's not justice.)

Marco's Girl

Marco is the bad boy prince of a mafia empire, but his heart is set on a darling good girl.

Pop-up Love

Mobsters, mayhem, a Hallmark movie, and a pop-up shop full of love? Yes.

Beauty and the Boss

She wants to bring her cat to work. He wants to bend her over his desk. Win-win.

His Virgin Queen

He killed her husband and took her for himself.

His Deadly Darling

She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

Hitman's Prey

He always seemed so nice ... (and hot).

Snow Angel

She wants to beat him in the lights competition; he just wants her. This Christmas is lit.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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