

A **kobo** ORIGINAL

Talia Hibbert

WRAPPED UP IN YOU



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Author's Note

This book contains mentions of abuse and depictions of anxiety. I have tried to handle these topics as lovingly as I am able. I hope this romance is a Christmas comfort read.

Talia xx

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One

@DoURe1dMe: 

@AbbieGrl: Welcome home.

“I come bearing biscuits!”

Abigail Farrell stopped typing numbers into her spreadsheet du jour, removed her cat-eye spectacles, and massaged the bridge of her nose. Hard. “Chitra,” she said. “Remember our little chat, the other day? About how you are too pregnant to trek across campus every time you fancy a tea break, and you should *stay in the biology block* and call me instead?”

Chitra, who was round and glowing and far too pleased with herself, gave a derisive snort. “I can’t say I remember that, no—”

“How convenient,” Abbie murmured darkly.

“But I *do* remember telling you that I need to stretch my legs more. So shut up.” Chitra plopped takeout cups from the school’s canteen onto Abbie’s desk, shoving administrative paperwork out of the way in a flash of mauve nails and gold bangles. Then she sank into one of Abbie’s office chairs and

propped her ankle-booted feet up on the other. “How goes the world of office management, my darling?”

“Swimmingly,” Abbie said, because everything she organised went swimmingly. Except for Chitra, who unfortunately refused to be controlled. “How goes the world of corralling whiny brats?”

Chitra arched a dark eyebrow. “You’re convincing no one with that ‘I hate kids’ routine. I know you keep a tub of sweets under your desk for any lost twelve-year-olds.”

Oh dear. If that information were widely known, it would completely undo the *Fuck off and leave me alone* aura Abbie had cultivated with her colleagues. Next thing you knew, people would be *popping by her office for chats* at all hours.

She made a mental note to hide the box of Celebrations better and wear more aggressive eyeliner. “I will neither confirm nor deny that accusation.”

“You’re ridiculous. Drink your tea and have a biscuit, you dizzy cow.”

Grudgingly, Abbie obeyed. The tea was rather nice. The canteen staff had added cinnamon in deference to the festive season, which was about as much Christmas spirit as she could stand.

“I have news, by the way,” Chitra said, biting into a gingerbread shaped like Santa’s head.

“Mm. Do tell.”

“According to my Instagram feed, Will Reid has been spotted at LAX. His fangirls reckon he’s coming home for Christmas. Isn’t that nice?”

Abbie wasn't surprised by this information; she'd already known, courtesy of the three Union Jack emojis Will himself had sent her an hour ago.

But she *was* conscious of the fact that Chitra didn't really care about Will Reid. Chitra cared about Abbie's Reactions to Will Reid, and occasionally she mentioned him in leading tones while studying Abigail carefully, as if waiting for some sort of meaningful response. Which was ridiculous, and pointless, since there was no meaning of any kind to be found in Abbie's responses to Will.

In order to prove as much, she sipped her tea and murmured dryly, "Ah. I thought you meant *interesting* news."

Chitra's unsubtle examination dissolved as she laughed around a mouthful of biscuit. "Don't let anyone else hear you dismiss our city's greatest success. They might excommunicate you."

She did not exaggerate. It wasn't often a small city like Nottingham produced America's third-favourite British heartthrob (as voted by the readers of E! Online).

Lowering her voice, Chitra went on, "I take it you'll see him at Christmas?"

Abbie opened her mouth to dispense an appropriately sarcastic reply. Unfortunately, instead of offering words, her brain helpfully produced a series of images instead.

Will Reid's familiar, million-dollar face smiling just for her.

His literal superhero body sitting on the floor beside her grandma's Christmas tree.

His hands—the same hands that had entire social media accounts dedicated to them—reaching for the clay ornaments

they'd made together when they were twelve.

"Yes," she said finally, the word a little hoarse. "Yes, I'll see him at Christmas."

Always would.

@DoURe1dMe: Is that a CHRISTMAS PARTY I see in your story?

@DoURe1dMe: I didn't know you went to those.

@AbbieGrl: Har de har. It's a work thing. Chitra forced me.

@DoURe1dMe: That woman is a very good influence on you.

The trouble with Will, Abbie reflected three days later, was that he lived in two realities at once.

Hollywood Will only existed on-screen. He lived in blockbuster American movies as Captain X, kicking aliens in the nuts without tearing his spandex. He lived in viral YouTube videos where he answered rapid-fire questions about his twelve-year acting career while a truckload of puppies scrambled into his lap. He lived in her phone, on social media, despite the fact that she'd muted all iterations of his name. Someone would tweet *Jesus Christ I'd pay him to spit on me*, and lo and behold, there'd be a picture of Will eye-fucking some glossy American woman next to a palm tree.

Really. Did they have anything *other* than palm trees over there? Perhaps a nice hedge or two?

Hollywood Will was inescapable and distant and might have been safe to drool over alongside the rest of the world, if it weren't for the fact that Home Will *also* existed.

Home Will had lived next door to Abbie since they were ten.

Home Will sent her adorable memes and indie artwork via his secret Instagram account.

Home Will was the lifelong best friend she shared with her twin brother, and that friendship was precious.

"Abs," snapped the twin brother in question. "Are you hearing me or what?"

"Well, excuse me for concentrating on the road instead of your non-stop mouth," Abbie said, even though she had actually been concentrating on emotional complications. She shifted gears and slipped into the motorway's fast lane to add a sprinkle of truth to her white lie.

Jason's snort filled the car, crackling through her speakerphone. "I call to check on your welfare, and this is what I get? Right, then. Understood. You're on your own."

"I'm rolling my eyes right now. I'm rolling them hard."
And *that* was the truth.

"Mind they don't fall out of your head," Jase singsonged. "By the way, I *said*, since I know you weren't listening: there is a blizzard. A big one. Drive safe."

Ah, the joys of the festive season. "Beast from the East?"

"Christ knows where it's from, but it's about to end up here, so I say again: drive safe."

"Don't worry." Abbie glanced at the setting sun, then at a nearby road sign. "I'm thirty minutes away from Grandma's,

tops, and there's no snow up here yet."

"Well, no. It's not due to hit Scotland for another day or so. But—"

"So you're calling me *why*?"

"But," Jase repeated firmly, "you never know, and preparedness pays. Anyway, I'll talk to you later, you ungrateful swine. I have to get back to work."

"Wait," Abbie said, before her brother could cut the line and return to the whirl of his atelier. "When are you coming up?"

For the last five years, the Farrell family had made a habit of driving up to Scotland for Christmas. Not because they were actually Scottish, but because Abbie's bonkers grandmother had decided that living in a Scottish farmhouse in the middle of fuck-off nowhere was her manifest destiny, and Abbie's three bonkers older brothers had coughed up the money to help her do so.

Will Reid had also coughed up the money, but Abbie tried not to think about that. In fact, she tried never to think about Will unless he was standing right in front of her.

Or DMing her adorable lizards, obviously.

"I don't know," Jase hedged, not because he couldn't leave for Christmas whenever he wanted—he could—but because he was a serial workaholic who didn't know when to stop. "The twenty-third, maybe?"

"The—? That's a week away, Jason!"

"Well, no one told you to drag your arse up there as soon as school was out, *Abigail*."

“Is anyone going to be at Grandma’s this week, or is it just me and the cats? I—I had hoped to see you, you know.” In fact, Abbie had hoped to spend as much time as possible with her entire family, which was a desire she’d once have taken to her grave. But over the last two years—since the divorce, and the therapy Chitra had forced her to endure—she’d been trying, incrementally, to express her feelings more often.

It was disgusting, but occasionally worthwhile.

There was a pause from Jase before he said, sounding quietly pleased, “Oh. Well. Then I’ll come up a bit earlier. And I *think* Will’s on his way.”

Abbie froze. “Is he?”

“I’m not sure, I wasn’t paying attention when we talked about it. Call him and ask.”

A shout rang in the background, one that sounded suspiciously like, “*Jason, if you don’t get over here and get these pins out of my tits—*”

“Ah, for fuck’s sake. Yeah, I’m coming. Listen, speak later,” Jase said. “Don’t die in a snowdrift, don’t let Grandma die in a snowdrift, don’t let Will die in a snowdrift while chasing a chubby robin, goodbye.” The call cut out.

“Why,” Abbie asked the interior of her Volvo, “am I the one responsible for saving people from snowdrifts?”

There was an ice princess joke in there somewhere, but she couldn’t be bothered to find it.



Two

@AbbieGrl: Oh my fucking god that is the cutest thing I've ever seen in my life

@DoURe1dMe: ... Are we still talking about the Komodo dragon?

@AbbieGrl: YES.

It was sunset when William Reid arrived at his destination, and sunsets were meant to be a good omen. Or so he'd heard. His neighbour back in LA (his *old* neighbour, now that the condo was in escrow) had said so. She'd been big on omens and beachfront yoga and sunning her vagina, and she knew all kinds of interesting stuff, so Will tended to take her seriously.

He parked on the gravel drive outside Patricia Farrell's house, switched off his engine, and took a peaceful moment to smile at the melting winter sun as it dripped away behind the trees. "Thanks for the vote of confidence," he told it, quite sincerely. Then the scarlet front door of the farmhouse swung open, and out tottered Ms Tricia. It was a freezing afternoon, and she wore only a housedress, a purple-and-yellow pair of *Despicable Me* slippers, and a ginger cat. Will decided he'd better get out and hustle her into the house before she caught her death.

As he released his seatbelt, his phone buzzed for the thousandth time. Kara. He pressed Decline.

“William!” Ms Tricia beamed. “Here you are, here you are. Let me help you with your luggage—”

“No,” Will said firmly, because the head of the Farrell family was the kind of lady you had to be firm with, or next thing you knew you’d find yourself, er ... buying her a farmhouse in Scotland. “No, Ms Tricia, I’ll get it. You’re very busy there with your cat.”

“Mmm, yes, you’re right,” she allowed, pausing to coo at the bundle of fur in her arms. “She’s pregnant, aren’t you, darling? She’s a very pregnant cat.”

“Congratulations to the happy couple.” He hauled his suitcase out of the car boot and strode across the gravel, practically shoving Ms Tricia into the house. Her long, pink dress looked awfully thin, and her brown skin was turning a bit blue already.

“How are you?” he asked once they were safe in the cozily lit hallway, a thousand family photographs smiling down from the lime-green walls.

“Don’t small-talk me, William. I hate it. Tell me some celebrity gossip, hm?”

Oh, I’ve got celebrity gossip, alright.

But he couldn’t say it out loud because it wasn’t for Ms Tricia. It was news for an entirely different Farrell woman, and she had to be the first one to hear it, because she was special. And this Christmas, *finally*, he was going to show her as much.

So he chose something else to placate Ms Tricia with. “Er ... Cherry Ambjørn is pregnant again?”

“Oh, William, you’re rubbish. I read that in the papers last week.”

“Fair enough.” He smiled, setting his suitcase down by the worn-but-elegant console table. This house was old, and old-fashioned, and a bit rickety, but Ms Tricia liked it that way. The stone floors were covered with red-and-gold rugs—for Christmas, of course; they were usually blue. And the stairs behind her had a stuffed angel decorating every other step, and a shit-ton of tinsel wound over the bannister. Will approved. Now he was here, he would bully Jase into helping him attach tinsel from the ceiling, too, and maybe they would nail some bells and whatnot to the doorframes.

Mistletoe, even. Mistletoe could be great for his plans. But perhaps he was getting ahead of himself.

“Where is Jase, anyway?” he asked out loud, then realised he’d carried his thoughts into his words, which was a problem of his. But he was with the Farrells now, and they were practically family, so no one would judge him if he came off a bit dopey. There weren’t a thousand cameras pointed at him, or co-stars who were paid to *pretend* to like him but secretly thought he was dim, or pretty people with ugly smiles who stared at his crotch a lot. Just the Farrells. And that suited him better than fine.

“Did you say something, darling?” Ms Tricia looked up from the cat she’d been cooing at, widening her eyes behind big, eighties glasses. They had pearl-studded arms that almost perfectly matched her short, white curls.

“Jason,” Will repeated, unzipping his jacket and hanging it up on the brass coat stand, trying not to disturb the tinsel taped to each hook. “You said he was coming today?”

Although, when Will had mentioned it during their last phone call, Jase had seemed a bit bewildered.

But Jase was a workaholic who spent ninety percent of his time high on espresso fumes; he always seemed a bit bewildered. It was his thing.

“Oh, I’m sure one of the children will be about soon. But no one’s arrived yet. You are the first. I don’t believe you’ve met Gravy, have you, William?”

Will blinked at the cat in Ms Tricia’s arms, his mind shifting with the subject. “I can’t say I recognise her. Very nice to meet you, Gravy. I’m charmed.” He patted the creature’s little ginger paw and was delighted when it hissed and tried to scratch him. Showed a lot of spirit and strong personal boundaries. He made an entry in his mental catcyclopaedia: *Gravy, ginger, new, has very firm character.* Ms Tricia’s cats multiplied at the speed of light so he’d set up a system to keep them all straight in his head.

That dealt with, he followed Ms Tricia into the kitchen. There was a pot of what smelled like curry goat on the Aga, which was also bedecked with a row of tinsel—which might be a fire hazard. He should probably Google that. “Shall I call Jase, see if he’s been held up?”

“Jason, Jason, Jason. You boys, you’re obsessed with each other.” Ms Tricia put Gravy down on one of the bar stools at the kitchen island. Will went to sit down as well, only to find the nearest stool occupied by a lazy-looking tabby by the name of Cassava, if he wasn’t mistaken. He politely chose another chair.

“I’m not obsessed with Jase,” he said honestly, “I just need to ask him something.” Will had spent months working up to this Christmas. The Christmas When Everything Would

Change. He had a plan, a foundational plan, a plan whose success (or failure) would dictate how the next year, or maybe the rest of his life, went for him. This plan was everything. So he really needed to run it by Jase before he started. Because Will had two best friends, and one of those best friends was the subject of The Plan. The other best friend was Jase, which made him the only one who could say, “Actually your plan is a pile of wank. Please fix this, this, and this before rushing off to make a fool of yourself.”

(During the course of his life, Will had learned that he needed external voices of reason. He’d been born without one of his own.)

“Well,” Ms Tricia said, “it’s possible Jason isn’t coming today.”

Will blinked slowly. “Oh. Did I get confused?” Sometimes he got confused. Maybe he’d come on the wrong day? Maybe he’d misunderstood on the phone. “I thought you said Jase was —”

“*Abigail*,” Ms Tricia interrupted. “I said *Abigail* was coming today.”

Will opened his mouth, closed his mouth, looked at Ms Tricia very hard, and tried to figure out why the nice old lady who used to pick him and the Farrell kids up from school every afternoon would lie to his face like this. Because information often fell out of Will’s head, and he frequently made ditzy mistakes, but he knew one thing for absolute certain: he would never, *ever*, forget or mistake or misunderstand even the barest mention of Abigail Farrell’s name. *Never*.

Before he could think of a way to sternly interrogate a woman who’d once caught him drinking squeezey honey from

the bottle, the sound of a car engine came from outside. He and Ms Tricia turned toward the window. Ms Tricia's ancient border terrier, Haddock, remained uninterested and unconcerned in his dog bed. Will wondered if it might be worth gifting Ms Tricia a guard dog for her birthday, now that Haddock was getting on in years. Surely it wasn't good for an older lady to be alone in the middle of nowhere like this?

Then something clicked inside his head. "Wait. If Abbie is coming today—is *that* Abbie? Outside? Right now?"

"Maybe. Likely. Yes."

Shit.

Will rocketed to his feet. This wasn't ideal. This wasn't remotely ideal. For one thing, he hadn't run his plan by Jase. The whole thing could be a wash, and he would have no fucking idea because *he hadn't run his plan by Jase*.

Second, the house wasn't ready. He hadn't had a chance to put up the rest of Ms Tricia's Christmas decorations, the ones that required power tools or stepladders. The house was *barely* festive at all—there weren't even any lights outside—which meant there was zero evidence of his many practical talents to overwhelm and impress Abbie with.

Although... it suddenly occurred to Will that Abbie didn't care about lights. Or practical talents. And now he was wondering why lights and practical talents had ever featured in his Very Important Plan when he knew very well that Abbie cared far more about pizza and sarcasm. Fuck. He'd already miscalculated somewhere. The plan was flawed. This was why he had to talk to Jase about things, but now Abbie was here and it was too late and—

And, third disaster of the day: like the house, Will wasn't ready.

He was aware that he looked good—it was hard to ignore that sort of thing when you'd built your career off of it—but right now he didn't look his best. His hair wasn't done—it was flat as shit from being stuffed under a knit hat—and his outfit was whatever he'd thrown on before leaving his mother's house this morning, Christ, he barely even remembered, but he just hoped his fucking socks matched, and—

And nothing. He took a breath and wiped a hand over his face and reminded himself to calm the fuck down. He wasn't eighteen anymore, and he didn't need to be a self-conscious nervous wreck. He was a grown man who'd learned his strengths and weaknesses the hard way, and most importantly, he was a man with a plan. Sure, the plan might have holes, but he'd figure it out as he went, and—

“Aren't you going to help Abbie with her luggage?” Ms Tricia asked lightly.

“Shit,” Will said, and rushed out of the kitchen.

Ready or not, the moment was here, and he would take it. For the very first time, he would take it.

Because all he wanted this Christmas was one Abigail Farrell.

Christmas made Abbie uncomfortable.

She understood its popularity, of course. For one thing, there was the whole, er, Christ aspect, which she imagined some people found very affirming. Then there was the food-

and-presents part, which she was hugely in favour of. Life in general could do with more food and more presents, as far as Abbie was concerned.

Really, the only thing she disliked about Christmas was the vile and inhumane level of cheer. The constant *noise*, the never-ending *lights*, the incessant *colour*. All of it said, *Hey, you, you miserable cow! You should be happy and earnest and spiritually at one with your fellow man!*

Well, Abbie's baseline emotional status was *mild irritation*; being earnest appealed to her about as much as the idea of sending nudes to her headmaster, and as for the whole "forced intimacy" aspect of Christmas, she'd been raised in a two-bedroom house with three older brothers. Abbie had lived as close with her fellow man as it was humanly possible to get, and she had found it a loud, messy, BO-scented experience where vulnerability would get you ruthlessly pranked.

Speaking of... She pulled up outside Grandma's big old house, grabbed her handbag from the passenger seat, and made sure her emergency can of Silly String was safely stashed within. When her brothers arrived, she would need an appropriate weapon to stop them messing with her hair or leaving worms in her bed. (Yes, Abbie's brothers were all—allegedly—adult men. Not that they seemed to know it.)

Silly String located, she flipped down the sun visor to check her lipstick before getting out. The matte, aubergine stain was still firmly in place, and so were the razor-sharp wings of her eyeliner, neither of which mattered since she was only going to see Grandma and ... and possibly Will, and ... and neither of those people especially cared about her appearance, and nor did she. So there.

She flipped the mirror back up and looked around the gravel drive. There was Grandma's ancient Estate. There was the battered '90s Corsa Will kept at his mother's house. But there were no other cars in residence, no brothers, no Mum...

And no ring on Abbie's finger. No husband waiting at home, the noose of his disapproval forever pulling her up short.

Two years after the divorce, she was still getting used to that part. Still surprised by the freedom.

Taking a breath, she gathered herself and got out of the car. A second later, Grandma's shiny red door swung open.

Abbie turned toward the noise, toward the spill of light across the rapidly darkening drive, toward the shadowed outline of a man she'd recognise anywhere, which didn't mean jack-shit since half the world would too. Will was bigger than he seemed on-screen, probably because everything was huge in Hollywood, but here in Britain, stuff was normal-sized. Except for Will, who had hands like plates, a chest like a very well-defined barrel, and biceps like cantaloupe melons. She tried to think of him like that—in terms of ludicrous comparisons, in terms of various body parts stuck together—but then he walked toward her and made himself real.

"Abbie," he called, warm enough to make her forget the bitter cold biting at her fingers. His face was a technical work of art, but when he smiled, it turned into something sweeter. Something softer and realer. He had smiled on the cover of *People*, and Abbie had seen it and felt nothing but disorientation—but when he smiled at her now, when he smiled in the semi-dark without a camera to coax him, she felt the corners of her mouth lift in response. She felt a tug in her chest and took a step, an actual *step*, toward him, as if he'd

pulled. She felt fifteen-year-old butterflies wake up in her stomach, which was fucking *ancient* for butterflies. No wonder they felt so enormous and sticky-slow these days. Like they were huge enough for their wings to brush her hips, her ribs, her throat. Like they were fluttering through honey, somehow.

God. She gave herself a moment. Then she sucked down a lungful of inky, frosty air and got over it. Just like always.

“Will,” she replied, and her voice was almost flat because if she didn’t exercise pristine control it would be the opposite. She let her gaze run impassively over him—at least, she hoped it was impassive, because otherwise he might notice that she found his knitted Christmas jumper and threadbare jeans hideously sexy. She reached his feet and bit her lip on a smile. “Erm... you’re not wearing any shoes.”

“Yeah, I just now noticed,” he said, which wasn’t sarcasm. He was serious. His smile had been replaced by a wince as he danced across tiny, icy stones, light on his feet despite his size. “Ouch.”

“Go inside, William.”

“No, ma’am.” He had gotten it into his head that she found an American accent charming. What she really found charming was how badly he did it, but she’d never let on. He came to a stop in front of her, and even in his mismatched socks, he was eye-to-eye with Abbie in her high-heeled ankle-boots. This was problematic only because Will had very searching eyes. They were dark and sharp, and they tended to hold her gaze with unnerving intensity. If he hadn’t made a career of being professionally gorgeous, Will could have become a priest.

“Abbie,” he repeated, softly this time, his breath a ghost between them. “You’re here.” This was the part where he’d

usually drag her into a bear hug, just like her brothers, but he didn't. Probably because everyone had been treating her as fragile since the divorce. Maybe Will was worried she'd shatter in his arms.

She wouldn't.

"Yes," she agreed. "I'm here. Or I'm a figment of your imagination. Or I'm the ghost of Christmas past."

He released another breath, this one laced with laughter. Instead of pointing out that she hadn't been here *last* year, that she'd stayed away while licking her wounds, he played along. "Do ghosts have luggage? If you do, I'll take it for you."

"Don't start treating me like a lady, Will, or I'll be soft by the time my brothers get here." She turned toward her car boot—and stopped when Will's hand caught her elbow. It wasn't the touch that shocked her—how could it? She could barely feel it through her winter jacket, and Will had always been a casual toucher, and anyway, they'd known each other forever. They used to play cat's cradle together. Grandma used to force them all to hold hands when crossing the road. Once, Abbie had twisted her ankle, and he'd been the only boy in the group big enough to give her a piggyback home.

So there was nothing shocking about the pressure of Will's hand on her arm. The only shock was how it still made her breath catch, still made her remember the Christmas they'd...

Well.

Weren't ancient feelings supposed to die eventually? Hers only ever seemed to hibernate. Every time she swore she'd kicked them, Will woke them right back up.

"You are a lady, Abbie," he said quietly, and then he ran his hand down her arm, all the way to her closed fist. Inhaling

sharply, she looked up at his face. His blond lashes were lowered, hiding his gaze. The set of his mouth, soft against the scruff of his beard, told her absolutely nothing. His warm fingers eased open her cold, clumsy ones, and he took her car keys. Then he finally met her eyes, his own like beguiling mirrors in the dark. “You’re cold. Go on inside.”

As a child, Abbie had believed her grandmother knew almost everything, and her mother knew the rest. As an adult, she realised that couldn’t possibly be true. Because if Grandma had really known the unholy thoughts chasing themselves around in Abbie’s mind right now, she would’ve whacked her youngest grandchild with a saucepan.

Instead, when Abbie entered the cluttered, spice-scented kitchen, Grandma turned from the Aga with open arms. Well, kind of open; there was a cat attached to her person, but that was to be expected. “Abigail! Come here, girl.”

Abbie went. She’d taken off her boots at the door, but she still towered over Grandma, those silver-white curls pressing against her chest as they hugged. Once upon a time, it had been the other way around. But Grandma still smelled the same, like lily of the valley and cat biscuits and home, and Abbie’s heart still settled around her.

“You good, darling?” Grandma asked quietly.

“I’m good,” Abbie answered, her voice equally soft. When she was a kid, they’d have this same conversation, conducted in whispers, so no one would hear if the answer happened to be *No*. Abbie had always found weakness rather uncomfortable. Grandma was the same.

“And how are you?” Abbie asked, letting the *Up here all alone at your age* part go unsaid. There was still time for Grandma to whack her with that saucepan.

“I’m *fine*, sweetheart. This is Gravy, look—I showed her to you on the Face Screen.”

“Yes, Grandma, I remember. Hi, Gravy. Hi.” Abbie reached out to stroke the little ginger thing and got a vicious hiss for her trouble. “Hm.” Turning away, Abbie went to Haddock’s bed in the corner and knelt to say hello. She’d always been more of a dog person. At the sight of her, his tongue lolled out in a grin and he rolled over, belly-up.

She was still fussing the little terrier when she heard Will enter the room. Her back was to the door so she couldn’t see him, which suited Abbie just fine. She had no idea why he’d decided to pull a leading lady moment on her out there, with the arm-stroking and the eye-fucking and the luggage-fetching and whatever, but she was feeling a bit like a bottle of champagne tipped upside down, which was embarrassing and also infuriating. Didn’t he know it was impolite to switch on Hollywood sex appeal around ordinary people? Did friendship mean nothing to anyone anymore? Had he progressed from shagging fellow celebs across the pond to dazzling *The Gals Back Home* with his American-white teeth? Bastard.

But that wasn’t fair. That wasn’t fair at all. Will wasn’t the conniving sort; he’d probably just forgotten to change gears. She exhaled her annoyance, gave Haddock one last pat, and stood. “Grandma. Did you know Will came out to meet me without any shoes on?” Her tease deployed, she turned around.

Will was leaning against the kitchen counter, a tiny black-and-white kitten tucked under his throat. Fuck. Kittens made everyone a thousand times more adorable—that was basic

physics—and Will was already too cute to bear in his red-and-green eyesore of a Christmas jumper. He stroked the little fluffball as if he didn't have a fucking cat allergy, the twit, and then he looked up with smiling eyes that slammed into her like the first heatwave of summer.

Abbie went to the sink to get herself a glass of water. This kitchen was always too damned hot.

“No shoes?” Grandma laughed. “Someone was excited to see you.”

Abbie snorted. “More like he thought I was Jase.”

Grandma laughed harder.

“Fine, yes, I forgot my shoes,” Will said over the noise, but while those words would have been defensive from Abbie, they were grinning and good-natured from him. Will was a sickeningly straightforward individual who'd never known a moment's self-consciousness. Which made sense; it must take mammoth levels of confidence to pretend to kill CGI aliens in front of an entire set.

“I forgot my shoes,” Will repeated, “but Abbie's forgotten half her clothes, so we're even.”

Abbie sucked in a breath of mock outrage and looked down at her outfit. It was true that her midnight-black knit dress barely hit mid-thigh, but it wasn't her fault women's clothes didn't come in five-foot-eleven. It was also true that her black stockings were incredibly sheer, but that was what happened when your thighs stretched nylons to the max. “Screw you, Will Reid, I look good.”

“Never said you didn't, Abigail,” he replied, and then—behind her Grandma's back—he *winked*.

With a *kitten* on his chest.

That had to be some sort of war crime.

“Now, now, children,” Grandma interjected. “Dinner’s ready. So make yourselves useful and lay the table, lazybones.”

“She’s talking to you,” Abbie murmured as she and Will approached the cabinet.

“She’s talking to *you*,” he shot back, cradling the kitten in one hand and grabbing a stack of plates in the other. For a moment, it was almost like old times. Before things had gotten ... complicated.

Then he leaned in close, so close his face must’ve brushed the dense halo of her hair, and added, “Your grandma was right, you know. I was excited to see you, Abbie. Always am.”

She almost dropped the silverware.



Three

@DoURe1dMe: Hey. I can see you, you know.

@AbbieGrl: ???

@DoURe1dMe: Arguing in the comments of that gossip account 🤔🤔

@AbbieGrl: -typing-

@AbbieGrl: -typing-

@DoURe1dMe: You can't defend me from every bullshit rumour.

@AbbieGrl: Factual inaccuracies grate at my soul and there's nothing interesting on TV.

Will woke up the next morning to cool, white sunlight spilling through the cracks in his curtains—or rather, the curtains in one of Ms Tricia's spare bedrooms. This Christmas, he, his mother, Abbie's mother, the twins, and the two older Farrell brothers would all be crammed into this five-bedroom house, which meant he'd be sharing his bed pretty soon. But until then...

Until then, it was he and Abbie alone on this floor, their rooms opposite each other's. If he hadn't been so bone-tired

last night, he would've done something about that. He remembered from their teenage years at impromptu house parties down the street and piss-ups at the park that Abbie had always been more open in the dark. But Will was still pretty jetlagged, so he couldn't speak to Midnight Abbie just yet.

Soon.

That decided, he sat up, stretched, and grabbed his phone. 10:01 a.m., which meant Abbie had been awake for hours and Ms Tricia was still semi-unconscious. Perfect circumstances for a bit of light wooing. (Will was an expert in the theory of wooing, having attended the premieres of many period dramas.) He read his news alerts, which always depressed him horribly, but seemed like the right thing to do. Next, he opened his top-secret Instagram and tried not to feel disappointed at the lack of messages from Abbie. It was probably weird that they'd DM'd each other last night from across the family room. He shouldn't expect her to crave his conversation the way he did hers. So Will shook off his frown and checked his texts.

Kara: You're killing me here, kid. Call me back.

He deleted that one.

Jason: You know, when you ring someone four times in the dead of night without sending a text to explain why, they might wake up the next morning and see the missed calls and think you were having a cat-induced asthma attack and they slept through it and left you to die in the wilds of Scotland. And then they might call their annoying sister to check on your welfare and be ruthlessly mocked. Learn to text, you fucking donkey dick.

Will laughed out loud at that one and hit Call.

Jase answered on the sixth ring, probably because he was busy pleating a bolt of silk or something fancy like that.

“Yeah?” he barked. His usual greeting, so Will didn’t take it personally.

“You know I hate texting. Sorry.” Writing stuff down took so *long*, and anyway, Will was bad at waiting for answers. If he didn’t get a reply within three minutes, he’d wander away from his phone and forget the entire conversation.

“Yes, fine, you’re forgiven.” Jase sighed. “What’s up, anyway? Cats getting to you? Grandma getting to you? Abbie getting to you?”

“Abbie,” Will agreed.

“Oh. Really? Is she making fun of your teeth again? Because they’re honestly not that white.”

“Oh no, it’s nothing like that. Actually, it’s—well, I had decided, since it’s been a couple of years since the divorce and she seems happy now, and since I’m done with Captain X, and whatnot, which is kind of like fate, timing-wise...” Will realised he was rambling. He tended to do that when nervous. The media training hadn’t helped, but luckily, the press had found him charming.

Jase had never found him charming, though, so Will decided to cut to the chase.

“I’ve decided it’s time to find out if I have a shot with Abbie. So I’ve got a plan. I’m going to spend a year making her fall in love with me. Or trying to, anyway. That’s enough time, right? And I’m thinking of this Christmas as a kind of pre-season. A warm-up. I’m trying to, you know, flirt with her. Or whatever. Just to see if I can make her think of me that way, because I know she doesn’t think of me that way. But she could, right? Well, I hope she could. But I don’t know how last

night went—she seemed kind of irritated, but then she always seems irritated, so...”

Will drifted off, trying to parse the air of vague amusement and impatience and uncertainty he’d picked up from her last night. The twins and Will had been best friends forever, like the three musketeers or something—but Abbie was always harder to read, and his feelings complicated the issue. Right now, for example, he couldn’t decide if the slight unease in his stomach was just nerves, or if it was because his plan was all wrong somehow.

Which was why he needed Jase.

“Hey,” Will nudged. “You there? You’re not saying anything. This is usually the part where you say something.” He got out of bed, the wooden floorboards cool against his bare feet. He needed to pace. If he didn’t get the nervous energy out via his legs, more of it would escape via his mouth. The phone in his hand remained silent, and he wondered if he’d accidentally cut off the call while speaking. He did that sometimes. Bloody touchscreens.

But then, finally, Jase spoke. “Yeah, I’m—I’m here,” he said, his voice all choked. “Sorry. Just kind of stuck on the part where you apparently want to *have a shot with Abbie?*”

Will paused mid-pace and blinked at the flowery wallpaper in front of him. This room, like every room in Ms. Tricia’s house, was wonderfully, distractingly bright. “Oh. Er ... Did you not know that I’m in love with her? I always kind of assumed you knew.”

“You’re—you—*what?*” Jase rasped. “Bloody *hell*, Will. You assumed I knew? You think I *knew* that—I mean—well.” There was a pause, and a slight, considering cough. “Well, yeah, maybe I *thought* you had a thing for her, at one point.

But I decided I was imagining it, because, Will, you never said! And you always say. And that was years ago, and—and she got *married*. To that *dickhead*. And you didn't say shit. What the fuck, Will?"

Will shrugged, opened the curtains, and smiled out at the bare, frost-kissed trees and snow-cloud skies. Then he remembered that Jase couldn't see him and explained. "I don't know. I was being subtle. And patient."

"Subtle," Jase repeated, "and patient." His voice dripped with scepticism. Will could practically feel it sliding out of the phone.

"Fine," he admitted, "I was shy. I didn't have much confidence when we were young. And I didn't want to fuck up the family." He still wasn't sure if Jase—if *any* of the Farrells—understood what family felt like for Will. Before they'd moved in next door and been effortlessly absorbed into their new neighbours' lives, Will and his mum had had no one but each other for ten fucking years. They'd struggled alone. They'd suffered alone. They'd survived his father alone.

And then they'd met Patricia Farrell and her daughter, Danielle, and all of Danielle's children. And when they were hungry, Danielle had come 'round with extra food she happened to have cooked. And when Ms. Tricia saw Will walking himself home from school because Mum was out working one of her two jobs, she'd said, "Well, that's no good. You might as well take the bus with us, boy." And when Dad had come sniffing around one night, drunk as always and furious with his wife for finally leaving, Danielle had come outside in her dressing gown, holding a kettle like a weapon, and said, "The police have been called. And if you don't leave

before they arrive, I will personally bash your brains out. That's a promise."

Mum and Danielle had been best friends after that.

And Will had been one of the Farrells. All of a sudden, he'd had access to a house where there was always an adult around, and that adult was always sober. He'd had boys to play with who didn't point out the holes in his shoes. He'd had a mother who, for the first time in years, smiled more than she cried.

And he'd had Abbie. He'd always had Abbie. And he'd always wanted more of her.

"You didn't want to fuck up the family?" Jase echoed, incredulous. "I have no idea what that's supposed to mean, because there is definitely nothing you could do to make you any less family to us." Like all Farrells, he said this incandescently brilliant thing very quickly, in a very bored voice, and moved immediately on. "So what you're trying to tell me, William, is that you've been into Abbie this whole time? You've been running around, starring in soaps, and sleeping with supermodels—"

"It was *one* supermodel, and she was a very nice, very persuasive woman."

"—winning Sexiest Arse Alive, and my sister's been running around getting *married*, and the whole time you've been in love with her, and you just ... haven't ... done anything about it?"

"I have done things about it. I got a good job, and I saw that therapist about my low self-esteem and childhood trauma or whatever, and I tried to see Abs every Christmas and I never missed her birthday—"

“I should bloody hope not,” Jase muttered, “since it’s *my* birthday.”

Will decided to ignore that. “I’ve done plenty about it, considering she was married for five years. Not to mention, there was that time when we—” His brain caught up with his mouth there, and he shut himself up.

“When you what?”

“Nothing.” That information was private, and while Will didn’t bother to keep private things from Jason, Abbie certainly did.

“When you *what?*” Jase repeated. “Please tell me you haven’t called out of the blue to confess that you’re in love with my sister and also that you’re having—ugh, you know what? Nope. Can’t even say it.”

Will frowned as he opened his suitcase and rifled through the clothes he hadn’t unpacked. “You can’t say what?”

“Will.”

He found his workout clothes and thought for a moment. “Oh, sex? You think we’re having sex? We’ve never had sex. Although I should be clear, I am hoping we will eventually have sex.” He paused. “If she’s into that.” He paused again. “But that’s, like, stage six of the plan. We’re still pre-season, Jase. Stay with me.” Honestly, the man was usually much smarter than this. Abbie had met her ex-husband at university, they’d been together forever, and after the divorce she’d been ... withdrawn. It was only in the last year or so that she’d fully regained her smart-arse confidence. She’d been hurt. She was different now. He couldn’t throw his whole entire heart at her like they were still young.

Sometimes Will thought about how things might've been if he'd thrown his heart at her when they were young.

Then he stopped because it made him sad, and anyway, it was pointless.

“Right now,” he explained, “I’m trying to change the way she thinks of me. She can’t see me as just one of the guys. She has to think I’m, you know, attractive.”

“Will. Abigail’s glasses give her twenty-twenty vision. She knows you’re attractive.”

“Shut up, that’s not what I meant. It’s a mindset thing. I don’t even know if she’s ready to date, which is why I’m taking this slow. So, stage two: in the New Year, I move back home —”

“You *what?*”

“—and start to see her more often. Not in a weird way. Just like, I’m here, she’s here, why don’t we hang out? She sees how super mature I am, and maybe she comes to my house sometimes and is in awe of my organised spice rack. I show her my Deap Vally records, and she starts ovulating. I might paint my living room black. She’d be way into that, right? Anyway, after that—”

“Stop,” Jase yelled. “Seriously, stop. I can’t breathe.”

“Oh, were you laughing just now? I thought someone had brought their tiny dog to work again.”

“Jesus, Will, you’re going to kill me. You’re actually going to kill me.”

Will bit his lip. “Shit. Is it bad? Is it a bad plan?” Because sometime in the last twelve hours, he’d started to worry it might be. Specifically, when he’d tried flirting with Abbie,

which he'd never done, and she'd looked at him like he'd grown an extra head and she was tempted to smack it.

"You know what?" Jase said. "It's not a bad plan, actually."

Oh, thank God.

"But there is a better one."

"What?" Will demanded. "Tell me." After all, he needed all possible options if he was going to choose the best one. Needed to see every angle if he wanted to stand a chance at doing this without destroying their friendship.

Jase laughed, as if this whole situation was funny instead of *Extremely Fucking Serious, Thank You, Jason*. "How about you ... tell her how you feel?"

Will blinked. Several times. That actually hadn't occurred to him, probably because he got dramatic when it came to things that mattered.

And Abigail Farrell mattered. Maybe a little too much for him to think clearly.

"You know how impatient Abbie is," Jase was saying. "If things start to change between you and she doesn't know why, she'll get annoyed. So just tell her, upfront, and ask her if there's any chance she could feel the same."

Fuck. Jase was right. *Obviously*, he was right. And this was kind of a dreamy concept, because she might say yes, and Will might be deliriously happy, and everything might be perfect by the end of the fucking day—

But.

The complete opposite could happen too. The complete opposite being that Abbie *didn't* feel the same, leading their friendship to collapse under the strain of his weird unrequited

love. And if there was one thing Will couldn't lose, it was their friendship.

His pulse suddenly became audible. "I ... don't think I can do that," he said, his voice cracking in the middle.

Jase sighed. "Yes, you can. I realise no one wants to be rejected, but—"

"I don't mind being rejected." He was an actor. He'd been rejected in every possible situation for almost every conceivable reason, several thousand times over the years. So that wasn't the problem. That couldn't be the problem. He wiped his free palm against his thigh and swallowed. "I just—I don't think this is a good time to be so upfront. Wouldn't want to scare her."

"Sure," Jase said dryly. "Her."

Twenty minutes later, safely dosed up with his allergy meds and firmly ignoring his looming self-doubts, Will headed downstairs. There was another tabby cat sprawled on the last step, and he jumped neatly over it with a quick "Morning, Bacon."

Abbie wasn't in the kitchen, but he could tell by the gleaming cereal bowl on the draining board that she'd been around. She was kind of a neat freak. He made himself a protein shake with the powder he'd brought from Mum's, then set about the delicate process of making Abigail Farrell the perfect hot chocolate, which was an art in and of itself.

Unlike most people, she only liked it unsweetened. Eighty-five percent dark. With oat milk, because she was lactose intolerant. Not too hot to drink straight away, or she'd

wait too long for it to cool and it would end up cold. And there had to be three marshmallows on top, in a perfect triangle—she'd never actually told him, but when he did it, she always looked pleased and saved the marshmallows for last, and that was evidence enough.

A short while later, hot chocolate in hand, Will found her in the family room. She was curled up on the corner sofa with Haddock in her lap and an embroidery hoop in her hands. She peered at that hoop like it held the secrets to the universe, concentrating so hard she shouldn't have noticed Will standing there in the doorway.

But she did, because Abbie noticed everything. She was smart as fuck and sharp as fuck and sweet as fuck, too. "Morning, Will," she murmured, her eyes never leaving the fabric. "Still jetlagged?"

Because she knew he was usually an early riser, like her. "Getting better," he said, and wandered into the room, stepping over a sunbathing cat. He liked looking at her from this angle, liked seeing her in the wintry morning light coming through the thin windowpanes, gilding her brown skin. She wasn't wearing makeup yet, so there was no dramatic eyeliner or dark lipstick to distract from all the stuff that was just Abbie: how fast she blinked behind her glasses when she was thinking, and the little bump in her nose where she'd broken it fighting Michaela Ashley from across the street, and the tiny mole underneath her soft, wide mouth. She had her thick hair scraped back into a bun that looked five seconds from escaping its elastic, and she was wearing a huge, blood-red cardigan that made him smile. Abbie swore she hated Christmas, but the only time she ever wore colour was in December.

He drank her in for long seconds, then went to sit at the other end of the sofa—but not too far away. Not touching, no. But not too far.

Look at me, he thought. *Look at me, Abbie-girl.*

As if she'd heard his thoughts, her lashes flicked up, and her gaze met his. She swallowed him with those clever dark eyes, but only for a second. She was focused on her embroidery again before he had time to draw breath. "Nice outfit," she murmured. "Don't tell me you're working out this morning."

He smiled and patted his neon-yellow shorts. "Of course I am. You can join me, if you want."

"You must've hit your head."

"You can watch me, if you want."

"You've spent too long in Hollywood. I have better things to do with my holiday than watch your muscles move, Mr. Reid."

"You've noticed my muscles, though."

She looked up again, her eyes narrowed this time. "Why, yes, Will. I've noticed you have the necessary anatomy to move, breathe, digest food, et cetera."

He laughed. "Really? You digest food with your muscles?"

"Mm-hm. Your digestive tract has a layer of muscle that helps food on its journey."

"You're so smart, Abbie."

"I'm so addicted to random YouTube videos, Will. Is that hot chocolate?"

He looked at the mug as if only then noticing it. “Oh, yeah. It is.”

“Is it for me?”

He grinned. “Now, why would you think that?”

And then she surprised him, which Abigail often did. Instead of pointing out the triangle of marshmallows or asking which milk he’d used, she said, “Because you don’t like hot drinks before breakfast.”

Will stared.

She waited, probably for him to say something in response.

He just stared some more.

She started to fidget, her gaze fluttering away from his, which was a sure sign she was blushing. “I mean,” she said, “I mean I’ve never *seen* you—”

She was about to take it back, and he couldn’t let her do that, because then he wouldn’t be able to ask any of the questions spinning round in his head. Questions like, “How do you know that?”

She rolled her eyes, but she was still uncomfortable. He could tell. “I’ve known you forever, Will. I notice things.”

Once upon a time, that might’ve made sense—but there was distance between them, these days, despite the friendship that remained. Years and miles and ex-husbands could do that to a friendship, even one as vital as a heartbeat, Will had learned. “For the last ten years,” he said, “we’ve seen each other only at Christmas and on birthdays. That’s not a lot of time, Abs. That’s barely any time.” Or at least, it didn’t feel like much to him. It certainly didn’t feel like enough.

But apparently it had been enough for her to notice that hot drinks on an empty stomach made him nauseous. Apparently, she'd noticed to such a degree that she felt confident in saying it out loud, like a fact, rather than a suspicion.

That meant something, right? That *had* to mean something.

Or maybe not. Because she shrugged and said, "I'm observant."

And ... well... she was.

"Right." He put the hot chocolate down on the coffee table in front of them and ran a hand through his hair. *Get it together, Reid.* This wasn't going to work if he pissed himself with excitement every five seconds. "Well, yeah, the hot chocolate's for you."

She looked at him, and it was warmer than the mug had felt in his hand. He had no fucking idea how she did that: how her face barely moved, how she kept her feelings wrapped up so tightly inside, yet showed them to you through her eyes. It had taken him years to realise that some people missed it completely. That they waited for her mouth to smile or her words to compliment when they should've been looking elsewhere.

Will always knew where to look.

"Thank you," she murmured, dry and restrained as ever, but her eyes said, "*You're a sweetheart.*"

And then *she* said it. She actually said, with actual words from her *actual* mouth, "You're a sweetheart."

He blinked, frowned, wondered if he'd just had some sort of stroke. "Er ... did you say something?"

“Yes.” She sipped the chocolate. The mug was still in front of her face when she mumbled, “I said you’re a sweetheart.”

Will slowly, slowly realised that he hadn’t imagined a thing. She’d said it. She’d said something *nice*, out loud, to another human being, and that human being wasn’t an infant or a close friend in floods of tears or a corpse on the day of its funeral. “Holy shit, Abigail.”

She glared. “What?”

“Nothing.” Will knew what was good for him.

Her glare turned into a smirk. “That’s what I thought.”

They were quiet for a moment.

Then his big mouth said, “Post-divorce therapy?”

She scowled, which was one expression she’d never hidden. “I am going to murder my own twin with my bare hands.”

“Actually, Harlan told me.”

“I am going to murder *all* my brothers with my bare hands. How unfortunate.”

“All of them? What’d Noah do?” Will found himself smiling, which was unusual for a conversation about fratri-whatnot, but Abbie had always had that effect on him.

“Nothing yet,” she said, “but I’d like to cover my bases.”

“Fair enough.” Will’s smile faded. “Sorry, by the way. I think he thought I already knew.”

“Probably,” she agreed, and gave him the look that meant *Don’t worry about it*, so Will didn’t. When Abbie was done with something, she was done with it.

“Enjoy the chocolate. After my workout,” he said, “I’m going to make you brunch.”

She put down the mug and pulled a needle gently through her hoop of fabric. “Honey, you know you can’t cook.”

“I took lessons.”

Some people might question that, or laugh at it, or something. Abbie didn’t. She was always taking classes, learning things—she liked to learn, loved it, had made Will less afraid of it. He used to think he was stupid, before Abbie had all but dragged him through their final exams and told him again and again, *“Smart isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, Will, but learning is something else.”*

So at his announcement, she just raised her eyebrows and asked, “Hm. How’s your French toast?”

“Glorious,” he said. “Life-changing. Life-affirming, some might say.”

“Yeah? Who might say that?”

“People.”

“Women?”

He smiled, slow and delighted. “Are you fishing for information, Abigail?”

She sniffed. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean, William. I’m just saying, women are my preferred sources for trusted opinions.”

Will deflated. “Ah.” Never mind. Obviously, she wasn’t going to swing into a jealous rage over his theoretical French toast-eating girlfriends after half a day of tentative flirting on his part and confused glares on hers. Yet again, he felt a warning flare in his gut, a little voice shouting that Jase was right and his plan was more sly and pointless than smart and brilliant—but the voice was quickly smothered by a blanket of

nervous hope. So many feelings, all of them messy, none of them as interesting as Abbie.

Shifting closer, he peered at her embroidery hoop. “Can I see?”

Abbie had always embroidered, as easily as people doodled. Probably had something to do with her mother and grandmother being seamstresses. She hesitated for a moment, which was odd. Then she sighed and turned her hoop around, and he saw a silky blue ocean dotted with little pink fish and lit up by a golden sun. Over the yellow thread, she’d stitched the words “A WARM AWAKENING.”

He smiled. Abbie’s art always made him smile. Then he blinked and realised something. “Oh. It’s ... I sent you that, didn’t I?”

She avoided his gaze as she answered. “I think so.”

“You think so?” He laughed. “How many people do you have sending you artwork over Instagram?” But then it occurred to him that she might have a lot of people doing that. He could very easily be one of hundreds of desperate individuals sending Abbie the things they loved just to make her smile and remind her of their existence.

Suddenly he felt a terrible mood coming on.

Until she rolled her eyes and said, “Fine, yes, you sent it to me. You have good taste. Sometimes I embroider the things you send. You know, when I’m running out of ideas.”

Will’s mental sun burst out from behind the clouds and burned his storm away. “Do you, now?”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Reid.”

“I would never.” But he was grinning, so that was an obvious lie.

“Yes, you would,” she said, and then she grinned back, which was so rare and so goddamn hot that his heart squeezed and his stomach tensed. Abbie had a wicked kind of grin, the kind that made you think of fucking. Or maybe it only made *him* think of fucking. Whatever. He could accept that as a personal problem. “You are horrendously flattered,” she said, “to influence the decisions of a master of embroidery such as myself.”

He sipped his protein shake and tried to look bored, which he was actually quite bad at. His acting had never won any awards; only his face had done that. “Master of embroidery? If you say so.”

“Tell me the truth or I’ll prick you.” She waved her needle menacingly.

“You would never—”

She reached out, and he yelped. It took him a moment to realise she’d poked him, not stabbed him. “*Ow.*” It hadn’t actually hurt, but he caught her by the wrist anyway and pulled her as close as he could without throwing Haddock off of her lap—which turned out to be pretty damn close. Close enough that he could see her pupils within the deep brown of her irises, could hear the tiny little breath she took. Could feel the ghost of it against his cheek maybe, or perhaps that was just wishful thinking.

He could definitely feel her wrist beneath his palm, and he savoured that. Abbie was private, and Abbie was strong, and Abbie was smarter than he’d ever be, but he could still feel the fragile bite of her pulse ... And. It. Sped. Up.

He swallowed. Hard. His organs turned around inside his body. “Abbie,” he said, and forgot all about his plan, remembering a night two years ago in this very room. “Abbie, you look beautiful today.”

Fuck. Shit. Why in God’s name had he said that? For years, Will had thought that sort of thing, and for years, he’d kept his bloody mouth shut. And now, during the first moment they’d spent together alone since her divorce, he threw compliments at her like a drunken pest at a bar?

Nice, Reid. Very nice.

Abbie’s eyes widened behind her glasses for one surprised second—before they narrowed with her trademark suspicion. “Beautiful, hm?” she asked, her voice like iron.

He let go of her wrist. Tried to collect his scattered thoughts. Went back to the careful, clever plan he’d devised during his months out of Abbie’s electrically compelling presence and found it had crumbled like a cookie under the force of her actual personality.

Well, shit. He might be sweating a little bit.

But ... *When in doubt, brazen it out.* That had been Will’s motto ever since he’d realised he couldn’t keep fibs straight in his head like the other kids. “That’s right,” he said, raising his chin. “Beautiful.” Then he smiled, because a large number of women seemed to like it when he did that.

Of course, Abbie wasn’t only a woman; she was a woman who’d known him and his bullshit for decades. “What are you *up* to, William?” she demanded, squinting at him as if he’d changed species before her eyes.

“Not a lot,” he said, which was technically true.

“Really?” she asked, the word dripping with disbelief, disapproval, derision, all kinds of terrible *d*-words. Haddock, clearly aware of the impending storm, picked up his rickety bones and clambered out of Abbie’s lap. Will watched him pad out of the room with more than a little envy.

Then he replied, with complete inadequacy, “Really, really, Abs.”

“Fascinating,” she drawled. “Because if I didn’t know you better, I’d *think* you were trying to flirt your way into my underwear like we haven’t been friends for twenty-one years. And I’m trying to figure out why you would do such a thing, and the only explanation I can come up with—” She faltered for a second, so slightly he might not have noticed it if he wasn’t (1) kind of obsessed with her, drinking her down like sixty-year-old Scotch, and (2) so on edge in this moment he noticed her every goddamn breath. “The only explanation I can come up with,” she went on, her expression unreadable and her eyes burning, “is that something’s happened since the last time I saw you. Something that’s turned you into kind of a dick. I don’t know what it is, but I’m not going to take it.”

Will’s mouth fell open. He was rapidly losing control of this situation, which he’d expected, but what he hadn’t expected was the direction it would spiral off into. “I—*what?* Calling you beautiful makes me a dick now?”

“*Flirting* with me makes you a dick,” she replied instantly, her voice low and steely, her expression hard and—beneath it all ... hurt?

Yes. It was hidden, like all of Abbie’s feelings, but he’d made it his life’s mission to decipher her, and he knew what the flash in her dark eyes meant. What he didn’t know was

how he'd managed to fuck up so spectacularly and with such jaw-dropping speed.

Or maybe he did know. Plans weren't his thing, and now he remembered why. It wasn't only his lack of organisation; it was the fact that this plan involved keeping secrets, holding back, and that felt a little like lying.

Jase had been right—and Will had been wrong.

Because he wasn't afraid of rejection, not usually. But he realised in this tense, suspended moment of oh-fuck regret that he was terrified of being rejected by Abbie.

"You can deny it if you want," she was saying, "but I'm not an idiot." The word had bite. Her lips pressed tight together, she nodded as if reassuring herself. "I am an adult woman. I know what flirting is. I'm not imagining things."

"I never said you were," he replied softly. "I'd never say that, Abbie-girl." *I'd never fuck with your head. I'd never make you feel like a fool.* Except maybe he already had.

At his words, something about her seemed to relax, just the tiniest bit. As if his honesty was the key to cooling her sudden ire. "Oh," she said, and seemed suddenly at a loss.

Which only emphasised exactly how badly Will had messed up here. In the aftermath of her explosion, the magnitude of it really hit him.

He'd made Abbie doubt herself, hadn't he?

He'd made her feel ... played with.

He'd ignored her twin's advice—ignored his own knowledge of her, and of the shit she'd been through with her husband—to carry out some cloak-and-dagger plan like she was a science experiment.

Well, fuck that. Fuck the fucking plan.

Will exhaled hard and propped his elbows on his knees, dropping his head onto his hands. “Shit,” he muttered.

“What are you doing?” Abbie demanded. She was always edgy when she was confused. Yet another thing he should’ve taken into account.

He should’ve taken *her* into account. That was the bottom line. But ... “Honestly? I’ve never done this kind of thing before.”

“Well, that’s a lie,” she said. “I do see the headlines, you know. And don’t say it’s all made up, because Jase mentions things, too.”

Will frowned and looked up at her. She was still lovely in the pale morning light, even lovelier with that defiant frown and the fire in her gaze. “What are you talking about?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m talking about your marauding penis, William. I’m sure it’s very cold and lonely up here in the Highlands. But you better order yourself a Fleshlight because you ain’t warming that thing up in me.”

Will almost choked on his tongue. “Abbie!” Since when had the Farrell twins been this sex-obsessed?

“What? I know what you’re up to.” She scowled.

“No,” he said, straightening. “You don’t.” Was it his imagination, or did a flash of hope appear beneath her stony expression? Like the impression of a flash of lightning after you closed your eyes?

Maybe. She was probably *hoping* he hadn’t turned into a complete prick since they’d last seen each other, hoping he could explain this absolute shitstorm in a satisfactory manner.

Which he really wished he could, but ... crap. What was he supposed to say? *Me and my marauding penis want a lot more from you than that?*

Ha. Abbie hated feelings stuff. She'd been single for two years, and she sent him more men-ain't-shit memes than she did Rihanna selfies, which was saying something. If he admitted he'd come here hoping to charm her into crushing on him, she'd probably laugh in his face.

But if he said ... if he said, *Thirteen years ago, you came home from uni for Christmas, and I saw you for the first time in months after seeing you every day for years, and it hit me like a brick that I was in love with you, always had been, and that has never changed, it's never changed—*

If he said that, she'd be unbelievably freaked out, and it would make the family Christmas awkward as shit.

And he'd lose her. Or rather, he'd learn once and for all that he'd never had her. Years of the-time-just-isn't-right hopefulness would fade away like smoke. The maybe-possibly-one-days he'd used to get himself through dark times would vanish. They'd never really have existed in the first place. Wanting Abbie had kept him going for so long that having to carve her out of himself might fucking kill him. And if he spilled his guts and she politely said, "No, thank you," he would have no choice but to die right then and there.

But if he lied, and it made her sad again, he'd die even harder.

So what the hell was he going to do?

"I care about you too much to fuck with you on purpose," he said. That was honest. That was real. "You know that, don't you?" He watched her face and hoped and hoped—

Yes. Her thawing was slow, like a reluctant spring, but it was there. “I suppose I do know that,” she said finally. “You’re—you’re like my brother.”

“No,” he said. The word came out firmer than he’d intended, but he didn’t regret it. He held her gaze and repeated himself. “No, Abigail. I’m not.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed. She studied him with those clever, clever eyes, and Will suddenly felt that he must be see-through.

But if see-through was what she wanted, he’d try his best to give it to her. He wished he could offer better, offer more, offer *truer*, but it turned out that throwing away all your fears at once was nausea-inducing and semi-impossible. So he met her halfway. “I’ve been flirting with you because I ... like you, Abbie.”

Her expression blanked. Her eyes said shock. Her mouth said “You—*what?*”

Well, thank God he hadn’t confessed to loving her. *Good call.*

“I know that sounds ridiculous,” he rambled. “We’re in our thirties. But—” *But this started when we were kids*, he almost said, and thank God for his rarely used brain-to-mouth filter that kicked in and cut him off. *Not yet. Not yet.* “But I don’t know how else to put it,” he finished. “Talking to you is the best part of my day, even if we only do it through Instagram DMs. And talking to you in person, with words, it feels like ... coming home.”

“That’s because we only ever talk when you’re at home,” she cut in sharply. Her expression was still unreadable, and her breaths were a little shallow, but at least she’d said *something*.

“Yes,” he agreed slowly, “but also because you make me happy. I can be myself around you, and I love it when you’re you, and I just want to make you smile, and also, like I said, you’re very beautiful and kind of incredibly hot. I could say more, but it might veer into unromantic territory.”

Silence. Then she repeated, the word so thin it was practically transparent, “Unromantic?”

“Yes. Because this, what I’m saying right now, is supposed to be romantic. That’s what I’m trying to do here. I don’t know if you want me to do that, but I kind of hoped you might consider it, and that’s what I’ve been trying to ... to figure out, I guess. If you would be open to it. But clearly I wasn’t very good at it, because plans and subtlety and stuff isn’t really my thing. I guess my thing is flopping my feelings onto the table like an unmasked-for penis, but trust me when I say I’m really trying to be restrained here, Abs, and, er, I know this is a lot, so ... you don’t have to answer right now, or anything. I just ... I don’t want to lie to you, Abbie. You asked me what’s happening. So. That’s what’s happening.”

For a moment, Will felt a thousand times better, getting all that off his chest. Then a few more seconds ticked by, and Abbie remained silent and obviously astonished, and Will remembered why he’d been aiming to reveal that stuff incrementally instead of all at once: Abbie didn’t really like emotions, or surprises, or surprising emotions.

He watched, his cheeks warm and his palms kind of sweaty, as she opened and closed her mouth a few times like a fish. Which wasn’t the greatest sign. Then she made things a thousand times worse by saying, “Will. What the fuck?”

And that, of course, was the exact moment Ms Tricia burst into the room.



Four

@DoURe1dMe: Hey, do you know where this quote's from?

@AbbieGrl: "If I loved you less, maybe I could talk about it more?" That's Emma.

@AbbieGrl: Why?

@DoURe1dMe: I don't know. I might read it.

Abbie quietly panicked to death while Will sat in front of her with his ridiculous fucking shorts and his T-shirt that said PUSH IT REAL GOOD and his hopeful, hungry eyes.

He looked at her like he'd really meant what he said, not in a casual way but in a galaxies-lying-beneath-insufficient-words way. He looked at her like they were both characters from the novel they'd talked about last night. He looked at her like this was a fairy tale, like he'd rip away thorns with his bare hands and climb a lonely tower to get to her.

But none of that was actual fact; it was interpretation, and Abbie's social interpretations were often skewed. She'd learned that in therapy. (Therapists were often rude as fuck; that was another thing she'd learned.)

She was supposed to put her thoughts on trial—it was one of the techniques she'd been taught—but right now, her mental judge and jury had Will's confessions on trial instead. "I like you, Abbie," he'd said. "You make me happy," he'd said. Abbie's head found those words guilty of reckless endangerment. They were cute but shallow when compared to what lived inside her. The butterflies were waking up again—he'd woken them up—and this time they were flapping hard enough to break free. Which couldn't be allowed to happen, because then Will would find himself face-to-face with what should be *secret*, ancient monster butterflies, and he'd be understandably horrified, and she'd lose all claim to dignity.

"Will," she said. "What the fuck?" Her body felt too tight, too brittle, swallowed up by a sudden storm of emotion. She usually kept these feelings wrapped up safe and hidden, but his words had them surging like a hurricane. The coil twisting in her belly, the heat racing across her skin, the way she craved his warmth like he was the antidote to life's frost—

Stop. This was only a crush, that was all. It couldn't be anything different. She'd told herself that for years, because the alternative was too depressing to contemplate and too huge to control.

Abbie needed control.

What she *didn't* need was Will stirring up things he didn't understand by flirting, by saying soft shit to her, by giving her chained-up urges enough hope to break loose. But before she could make that fact clear (or, alternatively, throw her hot chocolate in Will's lap to distract him before climbing out of the window and running to Edinburgh), Grandma burst into the room.

Will and Abbie both jolted, their impossible bubble popped, their attention diverted—for now. “Gravy!” Grandma said from the doorway, still wearing her silk headscarf and frilled nightdress.

Will, of course, rose to his feet at once. “Is she having the babies?” He looked like a concerned husband being informed his wife’s water had broken. Abbie couldn’t even tell her heart off for squeezing. Calm would be a thousand times more difficult to maintain now that Will was running around claiming to *like* her.

Not that *like* meant anything. It might, if they were strangers, or if Abbie was ordinary. But she wasn’t ordinary. Abbie was the sort of person who, on hearing that an old friend had developed some belated attraction toward her, stepped into what should be the puddle of her responding affection to find that it was in fact a well, a hidden lagoon, a leagues-deep ocean. Abbie was a heart that beat too hard and usually ended up bruised.

Don’t panic. This will pass. Everything will go back to normal.

For him it would, anyway.

“No, no,” Grandma was saying, waving away Will’s concern. “Although she did just wake me up, trying to break out of the window when she *knows* she’s not allowed outside.” A despairing shake of the head, and Grandma moved swiftly on. “I got up to close the curtains properly, and I saw the snow! Which reminded me—the blizzard! It’s coming—”

Abbie squinted out at the barely-there snow, opened her mouth to argue, then thought better of it.

“—and we’ve got *nothing* for Christmas dinner yet. Chicken, rice, *gravy*, roasties, those giant Yorkshire puddings

you love, William...”

Abbie could hear Will’s stomach grumble at that. He downed the rest of his protein shake and said, “Hm. Yeah. I do love those Yorkshires. Me and Abbie best get to the shop.”

This sentence had a similar effect on Abbie as a short round of electrocution. “The shop?” she squeaked, when what she really wanted to say was, “*Me and you? Alone? For a sustained period of time? After that? I think the fuck not.*”

“Exactly,” Grandma agreed, apparently relieved beyond measure. “I already wrote you a list.” She hurried into the room, slapped a sheet of scrawled-upon paper down in front of them, and left before Abbie could ask, “*Didn’t you say you’d just woken up?*”

The car ride was a tad awkward.

Grandma’s local Asda—she’d *insisted* on Asda—was an hour away. She usually got the shopping delivered, but apparently, she’d forgotten to organise that because she was so busy massaging Gravy’s pregnant paws or whatever the hell she got up to. Abbie supposed she should count herself lucky that Will had at least gotten changed for the trip; if she’d had to spend an hour watching his golden hair-dusted thighs flex every time he changed gears, she might’ve lost her mind.

Fortunately, he was wearing jeans and another heinously festive jumper, which was as interesting as his neon sportswear and bare muscles, but far easier to ignore. They spent a solid forty-five minutes in blessed, relieving silence, silence so complete and pure that she almost believed he might have already gotten over his temporary attraction to her.

Then he ruined everything by asking, “So. About that thing I said before...”

She tossed him a *what now?* look of exasperation and dug the fingers of her left hand into her seat, where he couldn't see. “Yes?” *Please don't bring it up. Please don't bring it up. This is the perfect moment for us both to silently agree that we will forget all about it and never ever bring it up.*

“Er...” He shrugged, then offered a hopeful smile. “You don't seem horrified.”

“No,” she lied.

“Or deeply offended.”

Debatable. “No,” she said, but it was kind of another lie. Some part of her wanted to be upset by the trouble he'd caused over a little *liking*, though she knew it was irrational. This wasn't his fault. Will didn't realise that he wasn't serious, and he didn't understand that Abbie couldn't be anything *but* serious—intimidatingly so, unnervingly so, *ruinously* so.

She'd have to teach him as much, however. Because there were rules to living safely. And the last time Abbie had broken those rules, the last time she'd let her reckless emotions make decisions for her, she'd landed herself years of toxicity, one hell of a divorce, and a huge therapy bill in return. Her romantic feelings were much safer in lockdown, where she preferred to keep them.

“Okay.” Will was nodding. “Okay. Well. I said you didn't have to answer right away, and I meant it, so, er, I should probably stop fishing for answers now and we will ... keep on being silent.”

Abbie knew for a fact that Will hated being silent, which was probably why his statement doused her in a sudden and

unexpected flood of guilt. Really, there was no need to drag things out. He had the sort of easy, loving character that made him susceptible to meaningless crushes, and the sooner she explained that to him and encouraged him to shake it off, the sooner things could go back to normal. So she might as well get it over with, even if, for some reason, her lungs sort of twisted and wheezed at the thought.

Asda's lime-green-and-white facade loomed in the near distance as she said, "I've decided you're having a midlife crisis."

Will stared at her for a beat too long and failed to see when the traffic lights changed.

"William," she said sharply.

"Shit." He hit the accelerator. Then he said, his voice laced with incredulity, "I'm having a what?"

"A midlife crisis," she repeated, because it was the only sensible explanation. Hopefully, now she'd pointed it out, he would see that she was right, and she'd be spared the indignity of having to explain it. "I know you're not middle-aged, but you're an actor so you're having it early to be dramatic."

"I'm not an actor."

She frowned. "Don't put yourself down. I know you're not producing the pinnacle of cinematic art, but your films make people happy, and you're a very believable superhero."

He grinned at that and flicked her a look as they turned into the supermarket carpark. Those dark eyes sliced neatly past her every defence and hooked into all her secret soft parts, as per fucking usual. "*Am* I?" he asked. "Why's that? Because I'm so naturally heroic?"

"Will."

“Because I’m superhumanly handsome?”

“Will. Could you focus, please?”

“Oh yeah, on my midlife crisis. Would you mind explaining it to me?”

Yes, she thought, glaring daggers at the side of his head. “Certainly not,” she said, trying to sound unperturbed. “You and I have known each other for decades. If we were remotely compatible, we would’ve noticed by now. Your newfound feelings of affection, therefore, are the result of general attraction—which, in my opinion, means nothing—familiarity, proximity, and the aforementioned crisis.”

Will brought the Corsa to a sudden, abrupt standstill. The car behind them beeped, loud and long. Will ignored the racket as he turned to face Abbie, his expression a picture of astonishment. “Wait. So. What’s happening right now is you’re really, actually saying my feelings for you are ... a crisis?”

Feelings for you. She really wished he’d stuck with the toothlessness of *like*. “Will,” she said flatly, “drive.”

He stared at her for another moment before shaking his head with a despairing air and driving again. “Incredible. Fucking incredible.”

His apparent surprise and mysterious mumblings were throwing off the nice, sensible conclusions Abbie had drawn for herself, so she decided to ignore them. “The trouble is,” she ploughed on, “you and I have different approaches to romance. You like your relationships simple and light and temporary—”

“Do I?” he murmured, apparently to himself, as he chose a space at the edge of the car park.

“—while I ... am different,” she said, ignoring the catch in her own voice. “You are the sort of man who can, er, like

someone and have a good time with them, then stop liking them and be done. But I don't think that sort of arrangement would suit our familial circumstances, and anyway, I'm ... not interested." There. That was nice and neat and clinical and very handily avoided any examination of *her* feelings toward or about Will Reid. Perfect. Now he'd flinch away from her psychoanalysis, realise she was right after all, and move the fuck on from whatever this mental/emotional blip had been. Which was exactly what she wanted. Obviously. Definitely.

Okay, maybe not *exactly* what she wanted, but it was the safest outcome she could possibly get.

Unfortunately for her, Will had never been safe.

He switched off the engine, undid his seatbelt, and turned to face her. "You're high," he said plainly. Then he got out of the car.

A bolt of annoyance crackled through her. She undid her belt and hopped out after him. "I'm clearly *not*, William," she snapped, wrapping her arms around herself to battle the cold.

"Then why are you being *ridiculous*, Abigail?" The snow, though light and insubstantial, swirled between them like a barrier. He collected their shopping bags from the car boot, then caught her cold hand in his and pulled her toward the supermarket. Little white flakes smeared on her glasses. His palm was warm and tough, and even though Abbie had fairly big hands herself, she felt like his enveloped hers. It didn't, not really, not technically. But it felt like it did.

Will tugged her, not into the bright lights of the supermarket's entrance, but to the hidden brick alcove where employee bikes were chained up and the light dusting of snow struggled to spread. There, in the icy shadows, he turned to

face her. Something about the play of light and dark across his face made him look like a slightly different man.

“If you’re not interested in me,” he said tightly, “that’s fine. But don’t tell me how I feel about you. Don’t *ever*.”

“Stop growling at me,” she bit back, “and get a grip.”

“Oh, fuck off, Abbie. Get a grip? Seriously? I can’t believe you’d be so—” He cut himself off with this anguished, frustrated sort of groan, dragging a hand through his hair. The image hit her like a slap. She’d spent the last hour panicking and furious, cursing him for dragging her blithely into chaos. It hadn’t ever occurred to her that Will—perfect, golden, effortless Will—might be feeling something like discomfort over this.

He couldn’t be. Because that would suggest he was serious, and Will was never serious, and he certainly, after all these years, couldn’t suddenly be serious about *her*. The very idea had the power to upend everything she’d ever told herself, every protective barrier she’d ever built between them.

Yet the hurt on his face, the deep furrow between his brows, and the way he rolled his lips inward suggested he really fucking was.

“Will,” she choked out, her stomach dropping like lead. “Will ... you ... you really don’t care this much.”

He looked up at her, incredulous. “And you really believe that, don’t you?”

Shit.

Okay. Okay. Some sort of monumental fuck-up had just occurred, because she could practically see him papering over his sadness. Her body began to hum with anxiety, like an electric generator kicking in.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out, only realising how true that was once the words hovered between them. “Sorry. That was ... rude.” Understatement. Had she really just explained away his feelings to him like he was five?

More shocking: did he really have feelings to explain away? Because that ... did not compute. Not after all this time. Years and years ago, she might’ve allowed herself to tentatively hope for it—but then she’d grown up enough to figure out that best friends didn’t seamlessly become lovers, much like dead dogs didn’t come back to life and fairies didn’t exist. So she’d left. She’d fallen for someone else, she’d gotten married, she’d gotten *divorced*. She was an adult, but she was also vibrating with uncertainty and confusion and—and—

Things with Will weren’t supposed to be complicated. That was a truth she’d trusted in her entire life, a truth she’d worked hard to uphold, and now it was shifting beneath her feet.

But here was another truth: he didn’t hurt her, and she sure as shit tried not to hurt him. She didn’t always succeed, since she was practically made of spikes, but she tried.

“I really am sorry,” she repeated, her tongue like lead and her words inadequate as ever. She wished she was better at saying sweet things. If this were the other way around, Will would give her the best apology of all time. “That was—a dick move. You caught me by surprise, and I overreacted. Shouldn’t have done it. Sorry. Won’t happen again.”

Something in his expression shifted, his gaze sparking, his lips parting. “Is that right?”

Abbie suddenly felt very hot and very closely observed. “Um.”

“It won’t happen again?” He took a step toward her. She took a step back and found herself pressed against cold brick. “So if *I* say it again—if I tell you I have feelings for you—you’ll give me an honest reaction instead of freaking the fuck out?” He was looking at her like he couldn’t see anything else—like, if he tried to shift his gaze even a half inch to the right to stare at the brick, it physically wouldn’t work. Like she was a black hole and he couldn’t escape. Which wasn’t that far off how Abbie had always seen her own hunger for this man, except she’d never imagined he’d look so eager at the prospect of being swallowed. He was supposed to flinch away from this kind of intensity. Everyone else always had, and Will was the lightest, brightest person she’d ever known.

She cleared her dry throat and pressed her palms against the icy, rough brick to keep herself in the here and now when she felt like floating away. “Er ... maybe?” She sounded so uncertain, and she hated it. But when she searched for her favourite unconcerned, ironic mask, she couldn’t find it. “I—just—*Will*. This whole thing is entirely out of the blue, and it doesn’t make sense.”

“There we go,” he said, and took another step toward her. “That’s what’s really bothering you, yeah? So say that, Abs. Just say that.” He took one final step, and they were chest to chest. She was trapped between the wall and his searching eyes, perfectly aware that she could push him away and he would go quite easily.

She didn’t.

“You panicked,” he said.

Her treacherous mouth was so used to being honest with him, it said “Yep,” before she could stop it.

He smiled, and it was like daybreak. “Wow. Well. I had no idea I could make Abbie Farrell panic.”

Her stomach folded up like hopeless origami. God, she loved his smile. “Don’t get too excited,” she told him sharply, because nothing about this conversation erased her need for control. She wouldn’t be a dick to him, but she wasn’t going to let him look at her like *that*, either.

Didn’t he know how dangerous it was to look at her like that?

“But I am excited, Abigail. Because I know you well enough to realise that you freaking out always means something.” He was seeing through her again in that way he had, like her forehead was transparent and her thoughts were scrawled out in glyphs only he could decipher with just a little effort. “I told you I have feelings for you, and you flipped your fuckin’ lid. What does *that* mean?”

“Absolutely nothing,” she said firmly. “I’m not trying to belittle your feelings, Will, but”—*I’m desperate*—“don’t you think a friendship as old as ours should be protected from ... heterosexual compulsions?”

He laughed, a low, comforting chuckle. “I love the way you talk.”

“Be *serious*.” *Please. I’m not what you think I am.* Abbie knew very well that she came off as cold, but the truth was she had always been on fire and would do anything to hide it. Releasing a little more warmth was a personal goal of hers these days, but if she went too far, she’d burn her own knickers off, and then where would she be? Knickerless in an Asda car park, that’s where. So she stayed strong.

Will sobered a little, because he always listened to her when it mattered. “Abbie, come on. The way I feel isn’t ... whatever you just said. I’ve—” He hesitated, which was unusual for him. There was something like determination in his voice when he continued, “I’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

A while. But probably not twenty years. “This is the first time we’ve seen each other in forever.”

“I know,” Will said quietly. He didn’t add, *When has time ever mattered between us?* because they both knew it never seemed to.

“I was married before that.”

His gaze dropped to her mouth. “I *know*,” he said, and she felt a familiar pit of guilt settle at the bottom of her stomach.

“And you’ve ... you’ve never been attracted to me before,” she said, which was a lot easier to force out than some of the questions swirling in her mind. Questions like *How long is a while?* and *How exactly do you feel?* Questions that would show how much she gave a shit, that would leave her vulnerable, out on a ledge, revealed to him in a way she didn’t think she could bear.

Careful, careful, careful. She had to be careful. She knew very well how deep vulnerability could cut when it was thrown back in her face.

“How do you know?” he asked, his voice like midnight embers.

“Know...?” Her trains of thought were more like silk threads right now, slipping through her fingers.

“That I’ve never been attracted to you before? You’re very attractive, Abbie.”

“Well—” She swallowed. “Yes, I realise that.” She wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea, but she liked the way she looked, and plenty of other people did too. “We are both decent looking, and you enjoy women, and I enjoy men, and so it’s not surprising that this might happen, but in terms of actually being specifically attracted to *me*, it seems unlikely. Whereas you being generally attracted and currently horny is more—”

“Abbie,” he interrupted. “Careful. Or you might piss me off.” He was so close now that she could smell him, the scent that never changed, cedar and the strawberry flavour of his shakes. So close she could see the faint ghosts of his freckles, the glint of the fine chain he always wore beneath his clothes, the hint of humour in his eyes, and of frustration.

She glared, irritated. “I’m just *saying*.”

“And I,” he replied, “have no idea how we went from *Will just wants to fuck me* to *Will barely wants to fuck me*, but I’ve decided to ride this rollercoaster, so here we go. Right now, I am *this* close to poking you with my dick at the side of a supermarket like some kind of neighbourhood pervert. I am doing that, Abigail, because when I am with you, all I have to do is look at your face and listen to your voice and maybe smell your hair a bit, and suddenly it’s easier for me to get hard than it is for me to control myself. That is because I find you majorly fuckable, and actually, I think about your fuckability quite often, and always have, and probably always will. So yes, I am very specifically attracted to *you*.”

Abbie’s body was suddenly possessed by two very distinct desires. First, the urge to slide down the wall and crawl away, commando-style, from this conversation, because one of her key barriers had just been firmly eroded by Will’s matter-of-fact and incredibly arousing description of his attraction to her.

Second, the urge to grab him by the arse and taste that defiant lower lip, for much the same reason.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

“Now we’ve got that settled,” Will continued, because Will was a smug prick, “I’d like to repeat that I’ve not been flirting with you because of your fuckability. I’ve been flirting with you because...”—he pressed gentle fingertips to her chin and tilted her head up, as if he knew she’d do anything to avoid his gaze right now and he was going to cut that shit out for her —“because, again: I. Like. You. It looks like that’s confused you, so let me explain. It means I think you’re great and I would like to take you places and give you things and watch TV with you and let you know how I’m enjoying my latest audiobook, and I would like to do all those things because you make my heart beat very fast just by saying my name.”

“*Will.*”

“Yeah,” he said. “Like that.”

“I—you—you cannot be this straightforward with me,” she choked out, truth sneaking from her lips. “It’s very—unnerving.”

“Trust me,” he said, sounding unreasonably amused, “I’m doing my best here, Abs. I really am.”

No; he was making her want to feel things for him with her entire heart, instead of only a secret hidden part, and that wasn’t—it wasn’t right, and it wasn’t *safe*. He had no idea he’d brought a knife to a gun party, and if she slipped up and showed him all the explosive shit she was packing, he’d be overwhelmed and he’d back away and then she’d be left alone with oceans full of useless love—*God, don’t say it, don’t think it*—and he’d be gone before this thing had even started.

She had to make him see reason before he fucked everything up.

“You can’t casually date someone you’ve known forever,” she told him quickly, “someone who’s all tied up in your family —”

“I’m not trying to casually date you. I’m trying to seriously date you.”

“We live completely different lives” was her next line, reeled out with something like desperation. “You’re a celebrity. I’m an office manager, and I like it. You live in LA, which seems like a literal nightmare, by the way, and I live here—well, home, and again, I like it. We’re from different worlds.” Wasn’t that always what they said in films and tragic novels?

Will clearly wasn’t impressed, because he rolled his eyes. “We’re *from* Forest Fields, and I only left because I had a better chance at making money from my face than I did from my so-called brain.”

Abbie narrowed her eyes, distracted from her current turmoil. “Don’t talk about yourself like that. The fact you made such calculated career decisions and ruthlessly exploited your own strengths *is* using your brain.”

“I know,” he said softly. “You taught me that.”

She blinked at the tenderness in his voice and at the fact that—well, technically he was right. She did remember telling him something like that, when they were young. That using what you had to get what you wanted was the smartest thing a person could do. She couldn’t believe he still remembered that, or that he’d taken it to heart.

It really shouldn’t make her breath catch like this, the idea that he’d taken it to heart. But it did.

It also drained all the panicked, cornered-animal fight out of her, and once that was gone, all Abbie had left was harsh reality and the root of her issue.

She shouldn't be this scared right now.

Shouldn't feel this much panic, or this much hunger, because a man had shown interest in her. The stakes shouldn't be this high, this soon, based on this little, and the fact that it was Will made things even worse. She'd started relationships before, and while you could argue she'd done them wrong, they had been *easy*. But this would not be remotely easy. This was already terrifying, and if easy had ended up a nightmare, where would terrifying take her?

"Will," she said, her voice a ghost in the cold air. "I ... I can't do this."

The words thudded between them like birds shot from the sky. He took a breath, and his eyes slid shut. When he exhaled, his hand slipped away from her face, and he straightened, and suddenly there was space between them. Not a lot. But enough that he was no longer all that she could see.

"I'm sorry," she said, and her voice cracked, for some reason, some terrible, embarrassing reason.

"It's okay, Abbie," he said quietly. For a moment, the expression on his face was enough to slice her heart into tiny pieces. Then he smiled, and that was even worse, because the smile was so fucking sad. "*I'm* sorry. I think I fluffed this up from start to finish, but—as long as we're still friends?"

God. She very nearly almost collapsed to her knees. Somewhere in an alternate universe, some incredibly different version of herself was saying, "*You will always be my friend, Will Reid, before you are anything else, because I have loved you for*

what feels like all my life, and when I loved you first, it was for the friendship you gave me.”

Abbie, unfortunately, wasn't capable of saying shit like that. Fear of her own emotions tied her tongue and locked her jaw and made her flinch away, which was good and smart and safe—or at least it had always felt that way, until this very fucking moment.

“Of course,” she said, feeling as if she'd just ruined her own life somehow, sometime in the last five minutes. “Of course we're still friends, Will.”

“Good,” he replied, and his smile was so beautiful and so honest, she could almost ignore the shadows in his eyes. “Alright then. We better hurry up with this shopping before we end up snowed in at a supermarket.”

She tried her best to laugh.

Will knew he'd royally fucked up somewhere down the line, because it was only 11:30 a.m. and he'd not only revealed his entire plan and been thoroughly rejected, he'd also made Abbie cry.

Well, not exactly. There had been no actual tears; Abbie didn't do that. If she had, he might've called an ambulance. But outside, in the cold, when she'd said, “I can't do this,” there'd been a ragged edge to her voice and a flash of sadness in her eyes that gutted him. No matter how little time they actually spent together, he knew this woman. He knew her well. And the look on her face out there—Yeah, she might as well have shed a tear.

Now Will was frantic over the only question that mattered:
Why?

Somewhere inside him was a howl of vicious pain, the kind you couldn't focus on until you were entirely alone because otherwise you might break down in public. So he forced his leaden muscles to move, chose a trolley, and snuck a sideways glance at Abbie instead. She'd packed all her emotions neatly away and was studying Asda's giant, flashing Christmas trees with fake interest that anyone else would consider one hundred percent real. But Will, as always, knew where to look. This time, his gaze dipped to her hands and found them clasped tight, pale little halos forming where her fingertips pressed too hard into the skin.

He'd known Abbie might not be ready for ... romantic stuff, not with anyone, never mind with him. She'd been through a lot. She'd always taken time to process her emotions, and judging by the way she'd kept her whole family at a distance these last two years, she was still doing that. But she was so fucking confident and put together and badass, it had never occurred to Will that Abbie might actually be *scared*—not until that moment between them outside. That moment when he'd seen a flash of fear besides the sadness.

"I ... I can't do this."

There wasn't anything this woman couldn't do. He absolutely believed that. But it was looking like she absolutely believed otherwise, and realising it felt like two hands twisting his stomach in opposite directions. He'd freak the fuck out about losing her—about never fucking *having* her—some other time. Right now, he wanted to make her smile. Wanted to be a friend first, because she'd needed that this last couple of years, and she still needed it now.

This decided, Will pulled the baseball cap and fake moustache out of his back pocket, slapped them both on, and slapped a few mental bandages on the gaping wound in his chest for good measure. He'd deal with that later.

"Will," Abbie said as they walked through the supermarket's bright, white entryway. "I ... I hope I haven't hurt your feelings. I do ... care about you very much, you know. I always have. You're—well, you're one of the best men I know." Since she was Abbie, she started this speech with her gaze fixed somewhere in the middle distance. But since she was also brave, she turned to look at him partway through, her jaw set and her expression determined. "You're very special to me, and I hope we—" She paused. Blinked. Squinted at him from behind her glasses. "Are you wearing a fake moustache?"

He smiled. It wasn't his best attempt, current feelings considered, but it was mostly hidden by the hunk of synthetic hair on his face, so he probably got away with it. "Yep."

"You are wearing a fake moustache," she repeated, "over your ... actual moustache."

"I don't have a moustache," he said. "I have stylish two-day stubble."

"Oh my fucking God," she muttered, but there was a smile teasing at the edges of her lips, and that was all he wanted right now.

"What?" he asked as they wound their way through harried shoppers. "You don't like it?"

"The dead-mouse look? It's not your finest moment," she replied, "but somehow, you're actually pulling it off."

Will winked.

She bit back a grin, and her gaze slipped away from him. “I have to tell you, though: if you’re hoping not to be recognised, you might want to go with a better disguise.”

“It’s the week before Christmas, Abbie,” he said confidently. “People have their own shit going on. No one’ll bother looking twice at me.”

She snorted. “If you say so.”

“I’m serious. I haven’t been hot property since, what, 2016? Only fans recognise me, and I doubt we’ll bump into any. This is just a precaution.”

“Noted,” she said dryly. And when she looked at him again, he knew he wasn’t imagining the gratitude in her gaze. A moment of unspoken agreement shimmered between them: it was easier to forget the upheaval and just get on with things, to be the way they’d always been. At least, it was easier for Abbie.

They swerved neatly around a toddler having a meltdown next to a promotional display of Terry’s Chocolate Oranges—Will didn’t blame the kid—and entered their first aisle. “Got the list?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” she muttered, pulling Ms Tricia’s hastily scrawled-on notepaper from her pocket. The handwriting was smooth and flowing and elegant and kind of impossible to read; Abbie had always been the best at deciphering it. “Grandma apparently decided that grouping by categories was unnecessary, so we’ll have to go through each aisle and hope we don’t miss anything.”

“I’ll tell you where we’re at, you tell me what we need. Teamwork.”

“Teamwork,” she agreed, and when he held up his hand for a high five, she rolled her eyes and slapped his hand down. “Dork.”

He bumped her hip. She bumped his back. He tried not to remember that moment outside when he’d said—God, he’d said so much wild shit, pressed up against that unbelievable body of hers, and her pupils had blown behind her glasses and her mouth had dropped slightly open and her breaths had coalesced quickly in the cold air between them, and he’d thought, high as a fucking kite, *She doesn’t hate this.*

But it didn’t matter if she had or hadn’t hated it. She didn’t *want* it. So Will shoved the memory firmly from his mind, and when it crept back, he shoved it again, and when it returned a third time, he had very stern words with it and decided it was best if he ignored his entire brain for the rest of the day. He was totally capable of that.

“Grapefruit,” he said, starting things off by blurting the first food his eyes landed on. “I like grapefruit. Grapefruit on the list, Abbie?”

“Mmm...” She frowned, scanning the sheet of paper. “Nooooo, but grapes are.”

“Both,” Will said. “Let’s get both.” And then, before his brain could show him more shit he didn’t want to think about, he threw ten grapefruits and a few punnets of grapes into the trolley and moved on. “Mango. I like mango.”

“Christ. We should never have left the house before breakfast.”

Will frowned. “I thought you had breakfast. Didn’t you? Are you hungry?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “*You’re* hungry.” Her words were exasperated, but she was all warm and secretly fond again, killing him softly. Fuck.

Later, he told the longing in his gut. *Later, later, later*. And then he put it away, for now.



Five

TWO YEARS AGO

It was midnight, which meant it was Christmas, and Abbie was alone. Alone in a house full of family she couldn't even talk to because her husband—her own husband—had abandoned her and she was wrapped up in pride and shame. She couldn't allow anyone to know her feelings because those feelings were foolish and dramatic.

That's what he told her, anyway. As if she was nuts. As if she couldn't see and hear and feel him slipping away from her, frantically erasing the pencil he'd written his vows in. This was the second year in a row they'd spent Christmas apart, and when she tried to bring it up, he said, "Stop fucking nagging. You hate Christmas, anyway." As if holidays like this one weren't secretly worthwhile beneath the bullshit, as if religious festivals didn't mean *Find your family*. As if family wasn't everything to her.

He was supposed to be hers.

But when she tried to say so, to say it plain, he looked at her with confusion and distaste and that cold, burning anger. Abbie was coming to realise she'd worn her impenetrable mask

a little too well before they'd married and taken it off far too eagerly afterward.

She should've known she'd be too much for him.

A noise brought her out of her thoughts, and she lifted her head from her hands. Will walked into the room, coloured lights from the Christmas tree slicing into his shadow.

"You should be in bed, Abbie-girl," he said, soft as a kitten's paw.

"You're not my father, Will Reid," she bit back, as if sharp words would hide the thickness in her throat, the threat of tears.

Sometimes her husband talked about Will—but only after a few beers. *"Did you ever fuck him, Abbie, back in the day? Just tell me. You can tell me. I can see you fucked him—you don't need to lie. And I don't even blame you. Look at the bastard. But God, just tell me."*

"I hate him, you know," Will said. "I fucking hate him."

She blinked back to the present. "Who? Dad?" Will had never met her shiftless father, so that seemed a bit strong.

"No," he murmured, and then he came to the sofa and bent and kissed—

He kissed her forehead. He kissed her forehead, but not the way concerned lifelong friends or pseudo-brothers usually did. No; this forehead kiss was a quick and desperate press of his lips that seemed to say, *Don't go, or if you have to, come back whole*, like she was heading to war.

Maybe she was. But it had occurred to her, as she ghosted through this warm and wonderful Christmas, that no one could *make* her go back to the war zone.

“Will,” she whispered, and looked up, but his head was still bent down, and their lips were too close. They should never be this close. Yet she must have moved closer because they—

Touched.

Abbie sucked in a breath, slammed herself back against the cushions, as far from that forbidden mouth as she could get. An electrical charge crackled through her veins, fizzed beneath the fine skin of her wrists, but didn't burn.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Will straightened slowly as if in a dream and stared down at her as he brought one ever-so-slightly shaking hand to his lips. As if she'd hit him and he couldn't quite believe it. “Abbie —” He sounded like a dying man.

And she felt—she *felt*—

“I'm sorry,” she blurted. “That was an accident. Sorry.” She stood and squeezed past the huge statue he'd become, and went upstairs to lie, stunned, in bed beside her snoring mother.

Abigail Farrell filed for divorce on New Year's Eve.

Abbie woke up with a snake of panic curled low in her belly.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

She lay on her back, staring wide-eyed at the darkness, jumping every time a cat meowed or hissed or knocked something over somewhere in the house.

Which was really fucking often.

After roughly three hours of trying to sleep while maintaining a ruthless grip on her own memories, Abbie gave it up as a bad job and grabbed her phone. It lit up the room, revealing a pair of round, glowing eyes watching her from the windowsill.

“*Christ,*” she gasped, then squinted into the shadows. “Dumpling?”

The chubby black cat took his name as an invitation and leapt halfway across the room to land on her bed.

“For fuck’s sake,” Abbie muttered, even as she stroked that special spot between his ears. “Fine. Whatever. As long as you stay away from Will’s room.” Dumpling loved Will. Almost all of the cats loved Will, actually—probably because he respected their many strengths and protected their vulnerabilities and tolerated their sharp claws and rough tongues. Probably because he didn’t mind prickly affection, not when he knew it was the best they could give.

Dear God, she really had to stop thinking about this stuff.

Tapping in the passcode to unlock her phone—since it never recognised her face without eyeliner, which was incredibly fucking rude—Abbie found a text from Chitra that had apparently been sent ten minutes ago. At 12:43 a.m.

Chitra: Do you ever think about the fact that foetuses are kind of like parasites draining your resources to promote their own survival?

Abbie released a deep, deep sigh before responding.

Abbie: No, and neither should you. Why are you awake? Everything okay?

Chitra: Kid won’t stop kicking. Am proud of her violent tendencies but concerned by her lack of loyalty in deploying them.

Abbie released a huff of laughter and sank deeper into the softness of her pillow. Then another text arrived, one that had her wide awake and edgy again.

Chitra: Why are YOU awake?

Abbie's subconscious provided an answer before she could craft a nice, sanitary excuse for herself. *I'm awake because every single thing I said to Will today was safe but wrong.*

Shit. She'd noticed some hideous thought creeping at the edges of her mind for several hours, but she really hadn't wanted to face it head-on. Now she *had* faced it, and in the space of a few seconds, it grew bigger and bigger. So big, in fact, that it uprooted the entire landscape of her mind and blew all her careful compartmentalising to shit.

Suddenly, all she could think about was Will.

Slowly, she typed out a message.

Coming to terms with the fact that I said goodbye to that therapist too soon, and it's probably time to say hello again. Also, trying to decide on the line between being smart and sensible and being too scared to risk anything ever. So far, making zero progress.

She stared at those words for a few long moments before deciding they were not an appropriate thing to send an exhausted, heavily pregnant lady in the middle of the night. So she deleted them and sent something else.

Abbie: Too much mocha before bed. BTW I really love you.

Chitra: DO you? Enough to reconsider my three-way co-parenting idea?

Abbie: ... Well, no. Not that much. You and Charlie are on your own.

Chitra: Worth a shot. I really love you too, by the way.

Abbie: I know. Now go to sleep.

Chitra: Fine. Night night.

If only Abbie could “night night” her way into unconsciousness as well. But with everything on her mind right now, she couldn’t. So getting up and making herself a cup of tea would have to do.

When Will had decided to move to the US, his mum had sat him down for a very serious chat. “I’ve seen what happens,” she’d said, “to ordinary boys who make lots of money and move far from home.”

Will had listened, wide-eyed, with no idea what she might say next.

“They catch sex diseases and die of cocaine,” Mum told him.

Will had bitten the inside of his cheek to prevent a smile. “*Oh*. Right. Yeah, don’t worry, Mum. I won’t do that.”

He’d meant it, too—not just in an *I won’t have unprotected sex and do too many drugs* sort of way, but in an *I won’t try to be numb when I’m lonely* sort of way. He’d taken that promise very seriously over the years.

Hopefully, getting wasted on Ms Tricia’s secret gin stash after the household had gone to bed didn’t count as breaking it. After all, he was back home in Britain, and he wasn’t lonely so much as devastated. Because locking his feelings away today, trying to act natural, had only made reality a thousand times worse when he finally allowed it to hit.

He raised his glass to the full moon beaming through the kitchen window. “Sorry, Mum. I tried.”

The moon glowed back disapprovingly.

He sipped his gin.

Will wasn't entirely sure how he'd ended up here, when this time yesterday he'd been lying in bed across the hall from Abbie, giddy with hope. Looking forward to a year of being near her, of showing her how he felt, of maybe discovering she felt the same way too. He should've known better. Abbie was too smart to hide things from, and too perfect to want him.

Wait. He frowned at the shadowy outline of his gin and shook his head. None of that. No bad thoughts. It was pointless and unhealthy and unrealistic, since Abbie wasn't perfect at all. No; she was sharp and sarcastic and occasionally harsh. She was hard to read, and he had a sneaking suspicion she lied a lot. She'd leaned into him when he'd said she was fuckable, *but* she'd shuddered when he'd told her he adored her. Unfortunately, while all those things made her technically not-perfect, they also made her fucking fascinating and—God, this train of thought was wobbling all over the shop.

On the kitchen table, his phone lit up and vibrated. Again. He checked the screen and saw it wasn't Abbie—of *course* it wasn't Abbie. Then he had a flash of recklessness and picked up anyway.

“What?” He was trying to stay quiet, so his voice came out an irritable rasp.

“Uh...” Kara sounded shocked as shit that he'd answered, but she quickly rallied. “Will. Finally, you picked up.” As always, a little time at home had made her California drawl strange to his ears. “What, did you come to your senses?”

“I was already at my senses,” he insisted, then frowned. Was that right? Did that make sense?

“Debatable, kiddo.” Kara snickered. “Listen. I know you’re home for the family Christmas right now—”

“No,” Will said firmly, and a bit wonkily. “I’m home for *good*. Hear me?”

“Are you drunk, Will? Never mind, don’t answer that. I know you’re home now, but how about in the new year, you come see me? We’ll have lunch and talk this through—”

“We’ve *talked* it through.”

She spoke blithely over him. “I’ve gotten a ton of scripts for you. Tons. It’s been a while, but you’re still hot with the teenage audience.”

“I hate teenagers,” Will said, which wasn’t true. But he wanted to see what Kara would do next.

Her response was smooth as shit. “You wanna go in a different direction? No problem. There’s this little indie flick about a beet farmer who’s searching for a godly woman and finds the devil instead—you wouldn’t be up for the lead, but there’s a supporting role as the beet farmer’s emotionally abusive uncle.”

Will frowned. “Uncle? I’m thirty-one.”

“Oh, yeah. The beet farmer is nineteen. Anyway, he finds this girl—”

“I don’t care,” Will interjected, which was the clearest he’d ever been, or rather, the rudest he’d ever been. He didn’t give a shit. It’d been months since he’d told Kara he was no longer interested in show business, and she’d been like a dog with a fucking bone ever since. “Okay? I don’t care. Stop it. I’m done.”

She scoffed. “You cannot be serious. All this over—what? A woman?”

He took another mouthful of gin and let it strip his throat like acid. “Mm-hm.”

“Like she wouldn’t jump at the chance to marry a famous actor and move to Hollywood,” Kara said, clearly growing desperate.

Will chuckled. “Nope.”

When Abbie had rejected him today, the whole Hollywood thing had been more of a negative than a positive—which he’d always known it would be.

But the biggest negative was, apparently, him. *I can’t do this*, she’d said, and really, was there a clearer, if gentle, *no-fucking-way* in all of history? Definitely not. Another imaginary blade slid between his ribs to join the rest.

“How are you gonna keep this girl,” Kara demanded, “if you have no money?”

“I have plenty of money,” Will said absently, already losing interest in the conversation. He squinted at the bottle of gin on the counter. Was it a trick of the light, or had he drunk more than the sneaky glass he’d intended? Ms Tricia would skin him alive for stealing her stash.

“Do you have enough money for—for children?” Kara demanded triumphantly. He had a feeling she was searching her mind for the trappings of romance boring heterosexuals like him preferred.

But he knew for a fact that Abbie didn’t want children, which didn’t really matter, since she wouldn’t be having them or abstaining from having them with him. So he gave a straightforward answer. “I have enough money for a herd of

fucking elephants, Kara. You and me—we grew up in very different ways, you know.”

“I know, I know. I’m just worried about you, kid. Do you even know what you’re gonna do with your life?”

Will sighed. “Yeah. I do.” He had it all planned out, sort of. He knew it would be a nice, normal, family-oriented existence, anyway. But it suddenly looked a lot bleaker now he knew for a fact he wouldn’t be doing it with Abbie.

As if the thought had called her, Will caught sight of a moving shadow from the corner of his eye and turned. There she stood in the doorway, her hair tied up for bed and her body wrapped up in what seemed to be puppy-print pyjamas. If only said puppies were enough to distract him from the contours of her body beneath said pyjamas—but they weren’t, so after a second he dragged his gaze above her neck and kept it there. He couldn’t see her eyes, not in the low light, but a slash of moonlight spilled over the lower half of her face, and he could tell by the set of her mouth—firm, full, tightening at the corners—that something was bothering her.

“Gotta go,” he said, and put the phone down, cutting off Kara’s squawked “*What?*”

“Who was that?” Abbie asked. Her voice was quiet and inflectionless. He really, really wished he could see her eyes.

“No one.”

“No one,” she echoed, and came into the kitchen. There was a cat in her arms—Dumpling, he thought its name was—and as she moved, it opened its glowing eyes and leapt gracefully to the floor. Unburdened, Abbie came to join him at the table. Now he could see her face, and he’d been right to think she was annoyed. In fact, her eyes—tired behind her

glasses, but dark and dangerous as still-hot coals—said she was angry. “Does *no one* always make you sound so upset?” she demanded, like if the answer was yes, she’d bash no one over the head.

“Upset?” Will frowned, his thoughts sluggish in his brain. He realised after a second that Abbie had overheard his depressed mumblings and assumed they were Kara’s fault, when actually, he’d been focused on Abbie herself.

Not that he was going to admit it. He’d had enough of freaking her out with feelings she hadn’t asked for. So he spilled another of his secrets, daring her to tell him what Kara already had: that he was being a fool. “It was my agent,” he said. “She’s pissed because I quit my job.”

Abbie blinked, looking as shocked as he’d ever seen her. “You *what?*”

“Yeah, I quit.”

He was waiting for some sort of judgement when Abbie took the wind out of his sails by asking with genuine concern, “Is everything okay? Are *you* okay?”

He kind of deflated. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “It’s weird. But it was ... time, I think.”

She leaned closer. “What does that mean, time?”

Will shrugged. “I was done with it.” Done with his latest project, yes. And done with always being on show, done with performing even when he wasn’t on set. Done with being apart from the people he loved, done with the strange schedules and the surreal lifestyle. He was grateful for every opportunity he’d had, and he knew full well that he’d achieved his success because he looked a certain way, fit a certain mould, and had

been extremely fucking lucky—but that didn't mean he couldn't be tired of it.

He'd hoped, one day, to tell Abbie how much he'd missed her while he was in America, and how he'd known she wouldn't enjoy his career any more than he did, and how he'd quit partly with her in mind. He'd thought it might seem a little romantic. Will was beginning to suspect he *was* a romantic, which was inconvenient, since the woman he wanted to be romantic for didn't seem to like it.

“Wow,” Abbie said after a moment. There was a short silence, a silence in which she studied his face, then his glass of gin, then the bottle on the counter. “Wow,” she said again, softly. “Okay. Well. I'm happy for you, and a little sad, too, I suppose.”

He snorted. “Because I was such a gift to the industry.”

“Hey,” she said evenly, but there was a familiar protective bite to her words. Protective of him. He'd heard it sneak out before, whenever her brothers made good-natured jokes about his very face-and-biceps-oriented career. “You are talented, you know. I watched those Captain X films. You're a master of camp comedy.”

He sighed. “Those films weren't supposed to *be* a comedy, Abbie.”

“I know, but the writing is terrible, and I could probably write an essay on how your treatment of it elevated the text and made the first *Captain X* such a breakout hit.”

Will faltered. “Er,” he said, suddenly feeling a thousand times drunker. “Could you?”

“I could.” The words were light, so light as to seem thoughtless. She might have gotten away with that, if she

hadn't kept talking. "I know the last two films didn't have amazing releases—they were kind of flogging a dead horse, at that point. But you still did a great job. You carried that franchise on your back, in my opinion. Maybe I *should* write an essay about it—" She broke off with a little huff of laughter that some might find wry, but Will heard embarrassment hidden there and knew she was simply self-conscious. "Well. Anyway. My point is, it's a shame. But if this is what you want, I respect that. You know what you need."

What I need is you. She really couldn't help it, could she? Being divine, that is. Being sweet in the most unexpected ways, and smart, and unrelentingly sexy. He was doomed. He was absolutely doomed. He sighed into his gin.

Abbie bit her lip. "You seem ... down, though."

"Yeah," he said hoarsely. *Surely* she knew why.

Or maybe not, because she told him, "It'll be okay. You'll find something else you love, and I assume you have enough money to keep you going while you figure it out."

Will raised his eyebrows. "Do you? Because judging by the texts I've been getting from Jase, *he's* worried I've been blowing my salary on yachts and motorbikes."

"Jase is an idiot. If you were going to blow it on anything, it'd be gym equipment." But he hadn't blown it at all; he'd found someone smart and mathematical to invest it for him—specifically, Abbie and Jase's brother Noah. The rest of the family didn't know that, but Abs was looking at him now as if she'd guessed, as if she thought he was smart enough to do something like that. She'd always thought he was smart enough. She'd always expected the best of him.

And this really wasn't helping the soul-deep crack in his solar plexus.

Abbie must've sensed the change in his thoughts, seen it on his face, because her smile faded and she shook her head. "Oh, Will. This is no good, is it?"

His heart stilled. *Me being without you? No, it's not.*
"What?"

"It's Christmas, or near enough. We can't have you upset. So ..." She flicked a glance outside at the steady swirl of snow in the moonlight, and he saw a familiar, thoughtful smile curve her lips. "I know what we should do."

Oh God, he thought. "Oh God," he said. "I don't think that's a good idea." Even though he suddenly really, really wanted to do it. "I'll probably slip and break my neck."

"Doubt it," she replied. "How drunk are you? Get up," she ordered, "and walk in a straight line."

He did, though he knew he shouldn't. "It's the middle of the night, and we're grown-ups."

"Shut up. It'll make you smile." She watched his slightly wobbly walk, then shrugged her shoulders. "That's good enough."

"Is it?"

She clearly wasn't listening. "Put some clothes on and meet me outside."



Six

Abbie wasn't entirely sure how she'd ended up here.

Actually, that wasn't true. She knew how she'd ended up downstairs—couldn't sleep, needed a cup of tea to silence the warring, worried thoughts in her mind. And she knew how she'd ended up wanting to make Will smile—she'd seen him drowning his sorrows during what sounded like a horrible call with his agent, had seen the sadness in his eyes as he spoke about ending his career, and knew from experience that deciding to cut something off because it was time didn't stop it from hurting like hell.

She just wasn't sure what had possessed her to fix things by dragging Will out to play in the snow.

Now here they stood, coats zipped up over their thermal pyjamas, bathed by the flashing red lights of Grandma's giant SANTA STOP HERE inflatable. She snuck a look over at Will and found him tipping his head back to face the gently falling snow. His eyes were closed, his nose pink, his smile sweet and dreamy. Her heart stuttered. Her carefully muzzled emotions snarled awake. The sheer force of her want, stronger than ever—or maybe just harder to ignore—almost dragged her across the metres between them.

Abbie's toes curled up in her boots as though she could cling to her spot on the grass.

For God's sake, she was supposed to be staying away from him. He'd completely shorted out her circuits today, had tangled up so many dangerous emotions in her that she'd had no choice but to compartmentalise herself nearly to death. Will's attraction to her? Locked up. Her desperate need for him? Chained down. The words "*I'm trying to seriously date you*" said in that steady, utterly unselfconscious way he had? Run through a shredder and locked in a box and thrown into a volcano.

She knew that wasn't a healthy approach to coping, but what was she supposed to do? Have a full-blown emotional crisis over lunch? Scare her grandmother by ripping out her own heart and throwing it at Will's head, which was what the prospect of admitting her feelings felt like? Far better to tie her inner turmoil to a chair, slap some tape over its mouth, and focus on the good, easy, simple stuff—like acting natural, and playing with Haddock, and putting up the last of the Christmas decorations. All of that stuff mattered, because it was immediate and it was familiar and it would stop her getting wrapped up in her own head and examining the way she'd almost dissolved at the thought of intimacy at least seven times today.

Because she realised now that that was exactly what had happened. She'd been ... afraid, earlier outside the supermarket. Afraid of vomiting up decades' worth of pathetic, unkillable, unrequited love, and finally confirming her lifelong suspicion that she wasn't just too much—she was too much for *Will*. She'd suspected it all her life. Flinched away from it all her life.

He was so sweet, so easy, so pure. She was so ... intense. Tangled. Overwhelmed by herself, or rather, overwhelmed by the things she could feel when he looked at her, things that belonged in fairy tales with bloodied swords and dramatic happy endings, not in real life.

Which is the kind of self-thought you're supposed to write in your feelings journal and examine thoroughly and objectively for any cognitive distortions.

Unfortunately, Abbie's feelings journal wasn't here. Before she could decide if running upstairs to get it would be too weird, something cold and hard and wet slapped her in the left tit. She gasped, snapped back into the moment, and saw the flash of Will's bright, familiar smile before he slipped behind the trunk of Grandma's holly tree.

"You bastard!" she called, outraged. "We didn't even count down!"

"You were so busy staring into space, I could've counted down from a hundred and you probably wouldn't have noticed," he shot back.

Touché. Squinting through the mess of her glasses, Abbie crouched and gathered a fistful of snow, packing it tight. "Get out here, you coward."

"Come and get me," he replied, the words floating to her on a wave of laughter. She felt as if he'd pinched her windpipe shut for a second. *Come and get me.*

I can't I can't I can't I don't know how.

That wasn't what he'd meant. He was fine. He'd get over it. He'd get over her. For heaven's sake, he was barely *under* her, while she was fucking crushed by the weight of him and always had been and—

She saw a flash of movement, the glint of his golden hair, and threw instinctively. A second later, he was standing there with snow all over his face, looking drunk as hell and shocked as shit, and Abbie was doubled over laughing.

“Abigail,” he growled, shaking his head like a dog.

“Too easy,” she told him, and it was like they were children again. This was all she wanted, all she needed: ease.

So why did everything feel slightly hollow now?

“You always had that unholy right arm,” he accused, and his voice came clear enough to indicate that he was close. Too close. Before she could dart away, he was there, grabbing the front of her jacket with one hand, using the other to shove a clump of snow down the back of her hood.

“Cheater,” she shrieked, trying and failing to squirm away. Icy wetness trickled down her spine, lighting up her nerve endings, forcing hysterical giggles from her diaphragm. “Argh! Fuck! Get off!”

He released her, but now he was the one doubled over with laughter. Abbie snatched up more snow and threw it at his gorgeous, irritating head, but he only laughed harder and grabbed her again and pulled her closer—

Oh.

His laughter cut out at the exact moment her humour was replaced by dangerous awareness. Whatever he'd intended to do, he seemed to have forgotten. Now he let go of her, his smile fading, his gaze all but burning away the few inches of space between them. There were little bits of snow clinging to his eyelashes, his eyebrows, his facial hair. His mouth was pink with the cold, and soft and familiar and so fucking dear.

“Abbie,” he said, and she could smell the sharp tang of good gin on his breath. An excellent reminder to stop whatever was happening here and step the fuck away. But before she could, he asked, the words only slightly slurred, “Why did you kiss me?”

She stared, uncomprehending. “What?”

“Why did you—”

And then the penny dropped, much like her heart. “Oh.” Oh God. She felt a bit sick. Was she breathing faster than usual? “Um. I don’t—I don’t know.” Fuck. They’d never talked about that. He’d never asked. And she’d avoided him like the fucking plague ever since because she hadn’t wanted him to ask.

She’d even missed family Christmas last year, for God’s sake, which had made things *easier*, yes—but it had also ripped her heart out of her chest, to act like she couldn’t make it, and instead hole up with Chitra’s family and pretend not to care that her own nosy siblings and brisk mother were miles away. Months later, she’d dodged Will as best she could on her and Jase’s birthday—which had been logistically awkward, to say the least. Abbie had done her absolute best to force distance between them, and still, she couldn’t forget. Couldn’t stop the giddy, nauseous mix of embarrassment and yearning that the memory stirred in her.

Kissing Will two years ago was, quite possibly, the worst thing she’d ever done in her entire life. (Which was saying something, considering the blue-eyeshadow and red-lipstick phase she’d gone through at university.)

Will frowned at her, something urgent and demanding in his gaze, in his voice. “You do know, Abbie. You’d never do something like that without a reason.”

“There is never a good reason,” she managed, “to be unfaithful.” Hm. She’d never said that out loud before. Shame had a very interesting flavour, and by *interesting*, she meant disgusting, vile, zero out of ten, would not recommend.

“Wait.” She didn’t realise she’d been walking away until Will’s hand, his glove still cold and wet with snow, tightened around her elbow. “Stop. Don’t look like that, Abs. I didn’t mean to make you sad.” The whisper of his voice, combined with the whirl of snow and wind about them, made her feel hypnotised. As if he’d built a whole new world just for them, and they hung suspended in it, and she couldn’t escape so there was no use trying. What a sweet relief it was, to pretend to believe there was no use trying.

“Not your fault,” she said around the lump in her throat. She couldn’t look him in the eye.

“Not your fault,” he volleyed back. “I know he was a bastard, Abbie. We all knew. I don’t think you did anything wrong—”

“I broke my vows,” she interrupted, because that was a rather firm bottom line. “I never said ‘til death do us part,’ but I certainly said ‘I give you my fidelity.’”

Will was quiet for a moment. She assumed he was re-examining his perspective and deciding she *had* done something wrong that night, until he replied, “You never did say the death thing, did you? I like that. You’re always so smart, Abs.”

She bit back a smile. One of her friends—a friend whose parents had a happy, healthy, decades-long marriage, of course—had called her unromantic for omitting that part. “Thanks? I think?”

“You’re welcome,” Will said calmly. He was always extra *extra* William when he was drunk, going from laid-back to literal god levels of not-giving-a-fuck. “Anyway. What I’m trying to say is, if marriage is supposed to be love, he kind of killed your marriage the first time he hurt you.”

Abbie stiffened. “I—you—” Her throat was tight. “I didn’t realise you, er ... knew about that.” Or rather, she had logically realised he must, but had decided to ignore it for her own good.

“Yeah, I knew,” Will said gently. “Why’d you think he wouldn’t come to Christmas the last couple of years? Harlan went to his job and threatened to kill him.”

Abbie wheezed. “*Did* he?”

“Of course,” Will said, like that was obvious and ordinary. Which she supposed it was. Or rather, it was exactly what she would do if some demon threw a book at her brother’s face and gave *him* a black eye.

Abbie supposed it rarely occurred to her that the people around her loved her as hard as she loved them.

There was something in that thought, but Will was still talking, still turning her upside down, heedless of all the feelings falling out of her pockets. “So I don’t think you should feel bad for kissing me, Abbie. I never meant that. I just meant—I always wondered—” *Why* was the last word, but Will sort of shook his head and decided not to say it. “Never mind,” he said instead. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter, Abbie.”

“I kissed you,” she blurted out, “because I knew it wouldn’t hurt. I knew it would be—good.” She stumbled over the words, but suddenly it seemed imperative to be honest about

this one fucking thing. “I knew if I kissed you, it could only be good.”

Will released a slow, shuddering breath, juniper and frost. His hands settled at her hips, and it felt as if she'd been shifting slightly out of her own body, but he'd just anchored her again. “That,” he whispered, “is the best thing you've ever said to me.”

Somehow, her own hands were pressed against his chest, and she knew she should move them, but this felt like the greatest possible place for them to be. “That can't be true.”

“It is.”

“Didn't I ever tell you that joke about the interrupting cow?”

“Way better than that.”

“Well,” she whispered, her gaze caught on his mouth, “now I'm kind of insulted. I thought you loved that joke.”

“It's terrible,” he replied. “I only laugh because you're so bad at telling jokes.” She was halfway between a smile and a gasp of outrage when he added, “I've been a bad friend to you, Abbie.”

Which was so ridiculous, it wiped the amusement right off her face. “What?”

He stared at her, solemn and sad. “When you're hurting, you're like a porcupine. You're all ... rolled up,” he said. “You want to be left on your own. So I tried to leave you on your own. I thought that was what you needed. But I think I was wrong. I think I should've been with you this whole time. Because you're hurting still.”

Those words were so simple and yet revealed so much—he'd noticed a lot, even when she'd thought she was getting away with it, hiding herself and her vulnerabilities from the ones she loved. She should've known she could never hide from Will. She suspected she'd never done a great job hiding from anyone. Her whole family had given her space, and she'd thought it was because she seemed fine, but maybe they'd heard her asking for it beneath her careful words.

That possibility was a little embarrassing—but also surprisingly lovely. It wrapped around her with unexpected warmth, as sweet and sunny as the man standing before her. The man who was sorely mistaken. “You’ve always been a good friend to me, Will.”

“I’ve been halfway around the world,” he replied. “I send you pictures, and I don’t call too much because I know you hate it. I’ve been letting you push me away, push us all away, and I shouldn’t have.”

“That’s not true,” she insisted, and it seemed urgent that he believe her. That he see who he really was to her, what he’d done for her. “You’re the kind of friend who respects me enough to give me the space I need, and loves me enough to stay present at the same time. You didn’t overwhelm me, didn’t put all your worry on me when I had enough of my own—but you spoke to me every day. You sent me sunshine through the phone. You made it your mission to keep me smiling, and I have to tell you, Will—there have been days, over the years, when your messages were the *only* thing that kept me smiling. Don’t dismiss that. Don’t belittle it. Because it—it meant the world to me.”

Her words grew quieter as she trailed off, her breaths cold and unsteady. She was kind of shocked by how much she’d just

said, but the thing was, she couldn't ever let him think badly of himself, not when it was in her power to disagree. Not even if it meant speaking with the kind of emotional honesty that usually made her want to crawl into the ground.

Right now, she felt as if she might say almost anything to keep this look on Will's face—this dawning pleasure, this aching affection. This. Fucking. Look.

He gazed down at her the way he had this morning, as if he'd give her the moon if she could bring herself to ask for it. Then he said, raising his voice over the wind, "Abbie. Tell me not to kiss you right now."

She found she had conveniently lost the power of speech.

A sober little voice in the back of Will's head told him that standing so close to Abbie, wanting her so obviously, wasn't right at all. But that voice was very, very quiet under the roar of alcohol and adoration.

She looked so pretty in the cold, with her cheeks and her nose gleaming, and her glasses dotted with moisture. And she sounded so perfect, telling him their kiss wasn't a mistake, that she'd meant it, that she'd had a reason—

The very best reason.

"I kissed you because I knew it wouldn't hurt."

He was only going to hurt himself, courting rejection like this, but still, he said the words. "Abbie. Tell me not to kiss you right now."

She didn't. She didn't. Instead, she released this shaky little breath and then oh dear fucking God she closed her eyes.

So he kissed her, and it was like a firework show in his gut.

It wasn't the first time they'd done this, not technically, but oh God, it was. Because two years ago, when they'd touched almost by accident, she'd looked immediately horrified, and Will—Will had been fucking furious. Abbie was black-and-white, Abbie was loyal, Abbie kept her word and was a stickler for the rules—so if she'd kissed him while she was married, even the teeniest tiniest bit, it had meant things were worse than he'd thought.

And he'd already thought things were pretty fucking bad.

So, yeah. His memory of that midnight kiss was eighty percent rage and twenty percent deadly frustration, which was the name he used for that feeling when you wanted to kick someone's husband in the nuts until they threw up their own spleen. But this? This couldn't be further from the last time. It couldn't be any more different. It couldn't be any better.

This was Abbie, pressed up against him like she'd crawl inside him if she could, her body warm and soft, temptation wrapped in comfort wrapped in sin. This was Abbie, one of her thumbs stroking the top of his right ear, this tiny millimetre back and forth as if she couldn't stop herself from touching him, from adoring him in the same tightly restrained way she did almost everything. This was Abbie, her mouth desperate and uncertain on his, the hibiscus scent of her hair swallowing him up like a heavenly cloud, until she suddenly pulled back and gasped, "Oh God, sorry, I'm so sorry—"

"Nope," he said, and pulled her close again. "You do not get to be sorry. I kissed you. So whatever guilty moment you're having at kissing someone you don't care about, I would love it if you could ignore that long enough for me to kiss you some more—"

“I do care about you,” she cried, more emotion in her voice than he remembered hearing at any point, ever.

Unfortunately, he was a bit too wankered to properly examine that fact. “You know what I mean. The way I care about you. Centuries in the making, kind of weird and obsessive, totally romantic and not just because we’re both sexy, *caring about you*. Like that.”

“Will,” she said, her voice ragged with frustration, and that finally caught his attention. “You don’t understand. I do care about you like that. I really fucking do, which is why this is a terrible idea.”

He frowned, suddenly annoyed with himself for all the gin he’d had—because if he was sober, those words might make sense instead of swirling around on the unabsorbent surface of his brain. “But—you said—”

“I said I *couldn’t* do this.” The words were fast and raw, her gaze sliding away from his, her fingers curled up tight in the fabric of his jacket. Keeping him close even when she looked like she wanted to be a thousand miles away. “I said I couldn’t, and I can’t, because—when I really, really feel things, so much that it overwhelms me, I either explode with it or I panic and close my fucking mouth. I don’t want to be—too much, to put myself out on a ledge alone. I don’t want to be *honest*, because, God, Will, you have no idea how bad it can hurt. When you feel everything in the world, but the person you’re with feels nothing. You don’t know.” She shook her head frantically while his stomach lurched at the pain in her eyes. “I’m scared of it. But I know for a fact that relationships only work if you can be brave, and I don’t know how to do that anymore. I only know how to be clever and how to be safe, and I don’t want—”

Will stared, astonished, scrambling to keep up, a fire igniting in his stomach and cautious hope burning through his veins. “What, Abbie? You don’t want what?”

“I don’t want to fail you,” she said.

God, he was too drunk for this. But he understood, or at least, he thought he understood—and he didn’t like what he was hearing. “Fail *me*? You—you can’t. You couldn’t. Ever. You’d never be *too much* for me.” The idea was so ridiculous, the words felt alien in his mouth. “And I’d never leave you alone.”

“That’s what you think.” She was smiling, but it was a vicious kind of smile, and he got the sense it was pointed entirely inward. “But you’re drunk. And you don’t know me. And you have no idea how fucked up I feel when it comes to things like this.”

Right now, his heart was glass. One wrong knock could shatter it into piles of fine, gleaming dust at her feet. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his face against her neck. “Abbie,” he breathed, and he wondered if she could hear all the love and aching pain in that word. “You think I don’t know you? You think—that I wouldn’t want you if I did?”

“That’s not what I said,” she muttered stiffly, which was the final confirmation that it was exactly what she’d meant.

“You’re wrong,” he told her, and nothing had ever been truer. “I do know you. You try to keep yourself from me, but you’re not that good at it. And I might not know everything, but I can see that you’re hurt, and I can see that you’re scared, and I don’t want you to—just stop. I don’t want you to be different for me. I want you to tell me when you’re struggling with it, and let me hold you like this. That’s all. I want you to *trust* me.”

“Just—trust you?” She’d been melting ever so slightly, but at those words she pulled back, sudden and sharp. “You’re not being fair.”

“What?” He studied her face, the teeth sinking into her lower lip and the sheen in her eyes. “Why?”

“Because—because you have no idea what you’re asking me,” she said. “None. And I have no idea what you even want, not really—”

“Everything,” he blurted out. “Everything.”

“But I can’t give you everything! I already tried that, and it was—bad. It was dangerous. It was—”

“It wouldn’t be the same,” Will said desperately, holding her tighter. “You told me that. You told me that yourself.”

“A kiss is just a kiss, Will,” she said. There was a sadness in her eyes that looked centuries old, and he could feel her pulling away from him, like she was water squeezed between his grasping palms.

“Abbie—”

Bright headlights cutting through the snow, the low purr of an engine rising over the howling wind. He stopped, looked over Abbie’s shoulder as a car prowled onto Ms Tricia’s drive. Really, he knew who it was after a second of squinting, yet he held out hope that he was mistaken and this was a confused, midnight traveller who would soon realise his mistake and turn the fuck around again and leave Will to fix this, to fix the devastation in her eyes and that hopelessness in her voice that sounded like a crumbling heart.

Unfortunately, things didn’t go the way Will wanted. The car found a space, parked, and its engine cut out. Then the

door opened, and Jason Farrell unfolded himself from the driver's seat and peered over at them in the scarlet light.

“Oi,” he called cheerfully. “Are you groping my sister on the lawn? That’s a bit much, Will.”

“Oh my fucking God,” Abbie said.

Will really couldn't agree more.



Seven

Grandma was thrilled by Jason's late-night arrival. Abbie had a feeling she should be thrilled too. After all, he'd saved her from blurting more embarrassing, emotional truths at Will, whose new name should be The Human Wrecking Ball of Protective Emotional Walls. She half-suspected she'd been about to confess her aeons of overwhelming love to the man, at which point he'd either be appropriately alarmed and throw it back in her face or—

Or worse. Worse, he'd like it—she was starting to suspect he'd *love* it—and things would be perfect, so perfect, until she forgot how to quiet her bad thoughts again and she'd flinch away from him or lash out and he'd be horrified and everything would collapse.

Things, in Abbie's experience, always collapsed.

So, yes. She should be grateful for Jase's interruption. Which did not explain why, the following morning, she found herself glaring daggers at him over the breakfast table.

"I'd no idea you were coming so soon," Grandma trilled as she dumped an extra seven thousand rashers of bacon on his plate.

“Ah, well. Abbie wanted me here.” Jase slid her a look that said *Clearly you changed your mind, though?* before continuing. “So I got away as soon as work allowed.”

On the other side of the table, Will snorted into his sausages. He’d already been for a morning run—followed by a series of very impressive burpees on the frosty lawn, not that Abbie had been peeking through the window or anything—so he was glowing with sweat and looked more fresh and gorgeous than hungover.

The freak.

“You do know,” Will was saying, “that you can leave work whenever you want, right? You work for *yourself*.”

“And I’m the world’s worst boss,” Jase twinkled.

“Oh, he’s such a good boy, aren’t you, my darling?” was Grandma’s predictable response to that tripe. She popped a kiss on Jase’s smug forehead.

Abbie stuck out her tongue. “You’re only her favourite because you went into the family business.”

“I don’t have favourites,” Grandma said, turning toward the Aga. “Oh, Jason, your extra hash brown is ready.”

“Outrageous,” Will muttered.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Abbie muttered back. Then she remembered that she was in turmoil over last night, over whether or not Will even *remembered* last night, and therefore shouldn’t be sharing mumbled discontent and knowing looks with him across the table.

Too late. Their eyes met, and his were like a shot of espresso: dark and delicious and dangerously invigorating. She felt a bit jittery. Shit. Abbie dragged her gaze away and found

herself staring at Jase instead. Her twin was currently watching her with that infuriating smirk he got when he thought he knew something she didn't. The dick. She stuck her tongue out at him again, then yelped at the familiar whack of a wooden spoon on her shoulder.

"Behave yourself," Grandma said sternly.

"Yeah, Abbie," Jase snickered. There was a thud under the table, and his smirk was replaced by a wince. "Ow." He turned to glare at Will, who was looking pointedly in the other direction.

Abbie felt herself smile.

"So, Will," Jase began, sitting back in his chair and adjusting the cuffs on his black silk shirt. (Jason had told her, when they were fourteen, that he intended to dress like a sexy pirate for the rest of his life, and he had taken that very seriously.) "How is it, being back home?"

Will rolled his eyes and stabbed another sausage. "Same as it always is. Colder."

"Hm, yes, fascinating," Jase said. "Abbie. How is it *having* Will back home?"

Across the kitchen, Grandma whipped around with an expression of eager delight. Which was both weird and unnerving. "Yes, Abbie, how is it?"

"Fine," Abbie bit out.

"*Really?*" Jase grinned.

Abbie narrowed her eyes at her twin. *Shut the fuck up.*

Jase arched an eyebrow. *Make me.*

Abbie kept on looking. *I'm serious.*

Jase rolled his eyes. “I see we’re all in excellent moods this morning.”

“They’re hungover,” Grandma put in slyly, “judging by the state of my secret gin bottle. Isn’t that interesting?”

“*Will* is hungover,” Abbie put in. “I was sober as a church last night.”

“That was the only churchly thing about you,” Jase said with a smirk.

Now it was Abbie’s turn to kick him under the table.

After breakfast, Grandma went off to wrap presents. Will announced that he was going to shower, then looked at Abbie in a way that made her feel a bit faint and said, “We need to talk later. Okay?”

“Okay,” she breathed, momentarily brainless and legless and very, very aware of her own vagina, and also of the tight tangle of nerves in her stomach.

Will disappeared upstairs, his absence returning all the oxygen to the room, and Abbie sucked in a calming breath and got a grip. Then she headed into the family room to embroider and worry, and Jase followed her there with the express purpose of getting on her nerves.

“Nice silk stitch,” he said, peering over her shoulder at her embroidery hoop.

“Leave me,” she muttered, focusing very hard on the shell of the little turtle she was creating.

“No, thank you. Snogging Will in the garden, yeah?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. She’d known last night would backfire on her. It was entirely Will’s fault for being perfect and enticing and upset and so adorable when he was drunk, and

for saying shit that was honest and earnest and so close to perfect it made her feel nauseous with fear.

That in itself was the problem.

Working hard to keep her voice unembarrassed, Abbie said, “Bring that up again and I will sneak into your room at night and shave your precious beard.”

“As if you’d do your own brother like that. You know I’ve got no jawline.”

“Try me.”

Jase laughed, but there was concern in his voice when he spoke again. “I thought you’d be happy. He’s into you, you’re into him, he’s already family—it’s so ... tidy. You love tidy.”

Abbie dropped her hoop and glared up at her brother. “There’s nothing *tidy* about it, Jason. What’s going to happen when we—?”

“What?”

She sighed and shook her head.

“Oh, what the fuck. Seriously? You’re already thinking about it going south?”

“Whatever,” Abbie muttered. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Abs,” Jase said gently, moving to sit beside her. “I understand why you worry about this stuff. Really, I do. But—Look. Feel free to punch me if I’m being patronising, but you know it’s okay to trust Will, right? He’s not a bad guy.”

Abbie looked up with a frown. “Of course he’s not. He’s the best guy. I’m worried about *me*.” Only when the words were out of her mouth did she realise how true they were. It

was exactly what she'd told Will—or tried to tell him, anyway—last night, but she didn't know how to explain it to anyone around her. “You don't understand. None of you do. You're all so fucking well-adjusted.”

Jase choked out a laugh. “Well-adjusted? Abbie. Are you serious?”

“Fine, you're all nuts, but you don't get *this*.”

Jase's expression softened as he slung an arm around her shoulders. “Well, explain it to me, then.”

Her throat felt tight. “You know I don't enjoy talking about ... feelings.”

“You and me both,” he muttered. “But since you and Will *clearly* can't get it together on your own—”

“We're not getting anything together,” she shot back.

“But you want to.”

Sometimes having a twin was quite awful. He sort of followed her about, showing up when it was least convenient, seeing things no one on earth was supposed to see. “Yes,” she admitted softly. “I want to. I wish I could. But if the last couple of days have shown me anything, it's that I'm just not ready.”

Will said he cared about her, and she believed him. He said it would be different, and she believed him. But that didn't change the fact that thinking about being with him gave her butterflies *and* jitters. That didn't change the fact that every time she tried to express even half of her affection, she worried she was inviting unhappiness. That wasn't healthy, and it wasn't the kind of relationship she wanted to give to him.

“I thought I was better,” she said out loud. “I thought I was ... fixed. But I’m not.”

“You don’t need to be fixed, Abs,” Jase said. “Look at me.” He caught her hand and met her gaze with an uncharacteristically serious expression, the one that said he meant business, the one she saw once in a blue moon. “All I want for you is happiness. I don’t care how you get there. Will is my best friend and I love him, but I’ve gotta be honest, you could suck the marrow out of his bones and I’d secretly be on your side. You are my sister,” he said slowly, clearly, unapologetically. “I don’t give a fuck what you do or don’t do, if it’s healthy or not, if it’s straightforward and simple or overcomplicated. I will never draw a line under you, and I will never want you to be fixed. Whatever you’re working with is good enough for me. Always has been, always will be. Okay?”

She exhaled shakily, those words surrounding her like the safety she hadn’t known she needed, the violence of her uncertainty calming a little, now. “Okay,” she whispered.

“Good. So. The real question is: happy—how do we get you there?”

“I am there,” she said honestly. “Most of the time. Just—Will. I wish things weren’t so complicated with Will.”

“Then uncomplicate them,” Jase said.

She knew he was right.

After years of careful avoidance, Abbie couldn’t stifle her feelings anymore. Will had practically dragged them out and forced them beneath a microscope, and the worst part was, he had no idea he’d done it because Abbie had handled the examination alone.

But she was done now, and the right path was scary but clear. She had to stop swinging between distance and longing, had to stop pushing him away while hoping, secretly, that he'd ask for more, had to stop claiming caution when really it was fear. Two facts mattered.

Will wanted her.

And she loved Will. So much, and so hard, that the idea of loving him out loud felt dangerous, like dynamite, inevitably explosive. She could feel herself pulling back from him because she was afraid that he might see it all inside her. What would he think? What would he *do* with the power that gave him?

She'd never explicitly asked herself the question before; she'd been too busy instinctively fearing the answer. But now, with her brother's arm like an anchor around her shoulders, she felt safe enough to forget her memories of a different time and a different man, and recall her memories of Will.

Will, who'd snuck her and Jase home from their first drunken party and held Abbie's hair back while she threw up. Will, who could spend Christmas in Cabo with billionaires but instead came home every year to play with cats he was allergic to. Will, who'd asked her about their first, terrible kiss two years after the fact and told her it was okay even after he learned that she'd essentially used him for a taste of sunshine and replied—

"That is the best thing you've ever said to me."

Those didn't sound like the words of a man who needed someone to be fixed.

Abbie had trust issues and Abbie was anxious and Abbie's natural neuroses had been magnified tenfold by her worst fucking nightmares coming true, so maybe she'd never stop

waiting for the worst to happen. Maybe a tiny piece of her would always expect the sky to fall. But when she closed her eyes and looked past the stomach-curdling panic and the I-should-have-seen-this-coming shame, she realised that even in her worst imaginings, Will wasn't the one crushing her. He was the one standing beside her, holding her hand.

Fuck. When she opened her eyes, they felt a little teary. Jase politely pretended not to notice.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Feeling nauseous," she replied dryly, and he smiled because he knew the real answer was yes. "You really love me," she told him.

"It would seem so," was his solemn reply.

"And because you love me, you don't mind if I'm not perfect." That followed, since she felt the same. And when Abbie set aside the fears she'd allowed to rule her, it also followed that ... "I bet Will could really love me too." Those words were whispered, because wishes didn't come true if you told the world.

Telling Jase didn't count.

He stared at her for a moment with a little frown on his face, but that frown soon dissolved into an odd smile. "Er, yeah," he said. "Maybe Will could love you." He cleared his throat. "*Probably*, in my opinion. You should ask him and find out."

Abbie groaned. "Except I've already told him a thousand times that I'm not interested and we can't do this and—"

"Oh, I see. So if you go up there now and tell him you've changed your mind, he'll say, *Sorry, you missed the bus, I've had*

an enormous change of heart since last night and cannot possibly want a woman who hesitates.”

Abbie bit her lip.

“That was a joke,” Jase added. “He’s obviously not going to say that.”

“Right,” Abbie agreed. “Yes. Obviously.”

“I mean, you do realise *he’s* been the one desperately asking for this and you’re the one who’s been coolly rejecting him?”

Abbie’s stomach lurched. “Wait. What?”

Jase shrugged. “I’m just saying. That’s the dynamic, right? It seems like you hadn’t noticed.”

No. No, she hadn’t. She’d been so certain of her own ... *unsuitability* for Will, it hadn’t occurred to her that she had the power to bother him with her nos and her can’ts. But what if she did?

Shit shit shit shit shit. Fuck.

“Oh my God,” Jase sighed. “You look like you’re about to throw up. Go and talk to him before you die of worrying.”

“Right. Yes. Absolutely.” Abbie put her embroidery on the coffee table and stood, her spine straight and her nerves wobbling like string cheese.

It was time to risk a little vulnerability for the man who’d given her all of his.

“You’re not being fair.”

That’s what Abbie had said last night, and the injustice of it had smacked Will right in the chest. Because how, exactly,

was he being unfair? At the time, drunk off his arse and dizzy with her nearness, he'd had no idea.

Then he'd slept and woken up and watched the snow falling outside his window and actually used his fucking brain. He'd asked her to trust him, tried to tease out the secrets he could sense hiding behind her clenched teeth, but he hadn't really shared his own. He wanted her to lay out all her vulnerabilities for him, knowing what she'd been through, knowing how she struggled—yet he'd held back the full truth of his own heart because he was afraid. She was dealing with shit he could barely fathom, and *he'd* been stressed out about a little light rejection.

“Wanker,” he told himself firmly as he stared up at the whorled ceiling. “You absolute wanker.” Then he got up and got dressed and ran for miles through the quickening snow because he needed icicles in his lungs, clearing his mind, sharpening his senses, helping him figure a way out of the mess he'd created.

It helped, as movement always did. By the time Will returned home, he knew exactly what he was going to say to the woman he loved. He just couldn't fucking say it because said woman had been distributing cat breakfasts and bantering with her brother and grandma.

The urge to get Abbie alone burned under his skin as he ate breakfast, as he showered, as he dried off and stared at his hazy reflection in the steamed-up bathroom mirror. A beige-and-blond blob stared back at him.

“You.” He pointed at the blob. “Don't fuck this up.” The blob was silent. “Just tell her everything and try not to die of embarrassment when she's horrified. No guts, no glory. Get it fucking done.” By this time, his reflection looked a bit less

blobby and a lot more determined. Satisfied, Will nodded, wrapped a towel around his waist, and unlocked the bathroom door.

It opened to reveal Abbie standing in the hall, her hands clasped in front of her and a strange expression on her face.

Will stopped dead.

“Erm,” she said. “Were you just talking to yourself?”

Well, shit. “Maybe.”

She must not have heard his actual words, because she smiled and shook her head and released a nervous laugh. “Huh. Okay. Erm...” Her eyes flicked up to his face, strayed down to his chest, then snapped back to his face again. “It has just now occurred to me that standing outside the bathroom until you finished your shower was an incredibly weird thing to do—”

“I don’t mind,” he said quickly, because he didn’t. First, it suggested she wanted to be near him, which was great, because he wanted to be near her. And second, she was clearly having trouble *not* looking at his half-naked body, which was excellent. Very excellent. He was not above using whatever advantages he had when it came to holding her attention. He had the vague idea that he should be ashamed of himself, but he was too busy trying to subtly flex.

“Right,” Abbie said, her gaze sliding completely away from him and landing on the floor—which was a good sign. Unless it was a terrible sign. He had no idea. This was why he had to get better at the whole talking thing.

With that in mind, he said, “Listen, I’ve been wanting to tell you—”

“Um,” she interrupted, “maybe you should get dressed first.”

He couldn't help himself. He grinned. “Should I?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Am I making you uncomfortable?”

She rolled her eyes and pushed her glasses further up on her nose. “You wish, Reid.”

“I do, Abbie-girl.”

She looked at him then, a little spark of surprise in her gaze, followed by ... a sweet smile on her berry-coloured lips. “Has anyone ever told you that you are an outrageous flirt?”

“No,” he said honestly. He didn't think he'd ever flirted with anyone but her. He'd never really felt inspired to bother.

“Perhaps I'm just especially susceptible, then,” she muttered, but by the time his scattered brain remembered what *susceptible* meant and started to feel pleased, she'd already stepped back and moved on. “Seriously, go and get dressed. I can't concentrate when your delts are staring at me.”

“Delts, really?” he asked. “I would've gone with nipples. Much more eye-like.”

She made a strangled sound of disbelief. “Are you really comparing nipples to eyeballs right now?”

“Are you really comparing delts to eyeballs? Be honest, do you actually know what delts are?”

“This is a ridiculous conversation,” she sniffed.

“So no, then,” he said, and she grinned, and God, he'd talk about literally anything if it made her smile like that. He was about to say as much when the door at the very far end of the

hall slammed open, and Ms Tricia appeared in the doorway looking like the terrorised heroine of a vintage horror film.

Her brown skin had taken on a greyish tinge, her mouth was a perfect *O*, and her hands were panicked claws wrapped around a half-price Ted Baker gift set. “Gravy!” she wailed.

Abbie blinked over at her. “Er ... don’t worry, Grandma. We got a ton of cornflour when you sent us to—”

“No! *Gravy!*” Ms Tricia dropped the gift set and rushed down the hall, sweeping past them both. “I just saw her through the window! She’s out in the blizzard! At the edge of the woods! How did she get out? William, get some clothes on. Jason!” she hollered as she all but sprinted down the stairs. “Jason, Gravy has escaped!”

Will stared after her. “Shit.”

Then Abbie said, clearly confused, “The blizzard?”



Eight

Yes, as it turned out: the blizzard.

Will threw on some clothes and came downstairs in time to meet Jase at the door. He looked like someone had dumped icing sugar over his head, then stuck him in a freezer. Icy winds howled through the open door behind him, and Will squinted out in shock at the snowstorm that had, apparently, popped into existence while he was busy wondering if Abbie preferred men who shaved their chests. (He was glad he'd left the situation alone, after her stare-a-thon out in the hallway.)

“I couldn't see her,” Jase said as he slammed the door shut.

“What?” Ms Tricia squawked. “That creature is pregnant as hell. I don't know what she thinks she's doing, going out in this!”

“Don't worry, Grandma.” Abbie rubbed soothing circles over Ms Tricia's back. “We'll find her. We'll all go out and search.”

“Good. Let's split into pairs and look for her.”

Jase and Abbie exchanged significant glances. “Erm,” Jase said, “maybe you could wait here in case she comes back?”

Ms Tricia speared him with a glare. “Shut up, boy. Fetch my boots. You can pair with me.”

Which is how Will found himself out in the blizzard he'd barely believed in, standing on the edge of the woods that bordered the south of Ms Tricia's property, holding hands with Abbie Farrell. They both wore thick gloves, but he imagined he could feel her warmth anyway. She held him tight, so tight it reminded him of last night's hazy, confusing bliss, when her touch and her voice had been the things keeping him steady. Of course, she was only touching him now because her glasses were a snowy mess, and without his guidance, she might fall into a well. But still.

“Grandma said she likes bushes,” Abbie shouted over the wind. “Let's start over there.” With her free hand, she pointed at a thick, evergreen bramble patch amongst the trees.

“Er, yeah,” Will replied, nodding as they started to trek over. The bobbles dangling from his hat smacked him in the cheeks. *Head in the game*. He needed to talk to Abbie, desperately, but right now probably wasn't the best time. If they didn't find Gravy—

“I need to tell you something,” Abbie said, jolting him out of his thoughts. He squinted at her through the swirl of snow, but she was looking straight ahead: all he saw was the thick, snowflake-dotted mass of her hair, the dark frames of her glasses, and the hard line of her jaw. That jaw could mean she was nervous, but it could also mean she was concentrating on not falling on her arse.

“Yeah?” he nudged.

“Yeah. It's about us.”

Us. Such a little word, but it set off an enormous fucking disco in Will's body. Complete with flashing lights to match the frantic pulse of his hopeful thoughts and pounding music to match his pounding heart.

"I was nervous about saying it," she continued, "but having this conversation outside in a blizzard while we're focused on finding a pregnant cat is really taking the pressure off, so..."

He laughed and swallowed a lungful of ice. "Fair enough. But—" He didn't know, actually, if this was the right time for a "but." Had no idea if she was going to shut him down again or if she was going to say something different, something he really didn't dare to imagine after his numerous spectacular failures over the last two days. If she *was* going to shut him down, waving his love all over the place might hit her like the equivalent of a cat dragging home a dead mouse. But if she was going to say something different...

They reached the patch of brambles and spoke at the same time. "You should know—" Will said.

But it was hard to remember the rest of his sentence when he realised what Abbie had said. Which was: "I've been in love with you since we were kids."

The thing about blurting out mortifying truths in the middle of a blizzard was that you could almost pretend the wind had whipped away your words and no one would ever know you'd said them.

Almost.

That's what Abbie did, anyway, in the aftermath. She could feel Will's all-seeing gaze burning the side of her face with

typical intensity, but there was enough snow between them to cool her fevered skin as soon as his eyes touched it, so that was easier than usual to handle. She set the most difficult of her words free, then bent down to examine the brambles and thanked whatever god was listening for this precise series of events—because she had a sneaking suspicion that, in any other circumstance, she'd have spent a solid twenty minutes working up to that confession.

She was starting to think Will might take a solid twenty minutes figuring out how to reply.

His silence was ... significant. The fact that he'd let go of her hand when she'd dropped down to search the brambles was also significant—even though it was exactly what Abbie had hoped he'd do. Any connection between them, even one so minimal, felt electric and important and far too much. She was working hard at this emotional honesty thing, but she wasn't about to completely overwhelm herself.

She also wasn't about to take back what she'd said. Or stop talking, now she'd finally started.

“It's been a long and weird experience,” she said as she parted various spiky branches. “I thought it was just a crush, and then I kind of realised it wasn't, but I really *wanted* it to be a crush because that was way less complicated, so I convinced myself it was. And then I just stayed there, mentally, for years and years because I was a stupid teenager and you were my best friend and avoiding my feelings seemed a lot safer than doing something about it and not knowing what might happen. It was all too high-stakes, I think. Then life happened and suddenly we were in completely different places and stages and—and it didn't matter anymore. I mean, I *thought* it didn't

matter anymore. But... You've always mattered too much to me. You scare me. I'm not—”

Will fell to his knees beside her so suddenly, she was worried he'd actually collapsed. Then two things happened at once: the first was that his gloved, snow-damp hand cupped her face and he said with a voice like the storm around them, “*Abbie.*”

And the second was that something beneath the brambles startled, its movement drawing her eye.

“Gravy!” she yelped.

“...What?”

“It's Gravy! She's over here.” Abbie shuffled on her knees, further to the right, and reached beneath the mass of thorns only to have Will catch her arm.

“You'll hurt yourself.” He frowned, uncharacteristically stern, and then proceeded to shove his hand under the thorns like the two of them were made of entirely different organic materials. Or perhaps he was simply behaving like his coat was thicker than hers, which was true, so, fair enough.

He carefully lifted the bramble, and beneath it lay Gravy, who ... appeared to be giving birth.

“Are you kidding me?” Will demanded. “Seriously? *Seriously?*” His voice was practically a growl. Abbie didn't think she'd ever heard him so frustrated.

“It's okay,” she said, unwinding the scarf from her neck. “We can help—”

“I'm not worried about the cat, Abbie,” he interrupted, which was also rather out of character. Will was very fond of cats, except for the part where they made him hack his lungs

up after prolonged proximity. “I’m talking about the fact that you just told me you love me. You just told me that, and I want to kiss you until I die, and instead I have to hold a bush while you talk Gravy through contractions.” She’d been avoiding his gaze very carefully since her confession began—but he said all this with such desperate, disbelieving passion in his voice that Abbie’s gaze was drawn to him without permission. And when she looked at him, she found that same desperation in his eyes, frantic and achingly tender, and it made her feel as if he’d touched every inch of her skin slowly and lovingly all at once.

The tight braid of nerves in her stomach unravelled, just a little. Enough for her to keep confessing, even as she tucked her scarf around an exhausted-looking Gravy and monitored the extremely gross but not unfamiliar miracle of life being squeezed out before their eyes.

“The thing is,” she told Will as she peered at the bubble-like amniotic sack, “I ... I don’t think my loving you is as important as you might think—”

“Disagree,” Will said immediately.

She ignored him. “—Because I’m not very good at it. Love, I mean. I have some, erm, issues, you might have noticed, and I’m so scared, Will. I really am. I’m afraid all the fucking time. And sometimes—often—I let that fear control what I do, and that’s when I make mistakes and hurt people, and I really don’t want to hurt you.”

“This is why you’ve been pushing me away,” he said. “Not because you don’t feel the same.”

“I feel *more*.”

“You don’t,” he told her. “You don’t.”

It was alarming, the reckless way her heart leapt at that. But already, Abbie was getting used to the nervous thrill that came with hope. After all, she'd just told Will a secret so huge she'd spent years trying to keep it hidden from *herself*, and nothing terrible had happened. The earth hadn't collapsed beneath them. Instead, he was looking at her like she was the sweetest thing he'd ever seen and saying things that lit her up inside, things like, "Abbie-girl, nothing you might do to me could hurt more than being without you."

"That is ludicrous and excessively romantic and horribly unrealistic," she told him, and her voice only wobbled a tiny bit.

"Get used to it," Will told her, "because I have a lot of feelings for you and they're all kind of unreasonable and I really don't care. It doesn't matter to me if you have things to work on. I told you last night, and I'll tell you today, and I'll tell you tomorrow: if you're scared, Abbie, I just want to hold your hand."

Oh dear. Oh God. She'd wanted to believe something like that, said by someone like him—no, only him, *only him*—for her entire life, and now she was determined to do so. To choose it. The very texture of his voice weaved between her ribs and held her tight, safe, secure. She was perilously close to sobbing, which made it imperative that she concentrate on something else.

Gravy was supposed to lick away the amniotic fluids surrounding her babies—Abbie had seen enough cat births to know that—but she must be too cold or too tired or both because it wasn't happening. "I'm going to have to do this," Abbie said out loud, and reached for the tiny new-born lump of fur and gunk, grateful for her gloves.

“Okay,” Will said. “I’m going to keep talking.”

“Yes,” she said softly, so softly the wind and the snow whipped her words away. “Please.” Because that ocean of affection she’d been so terrified of drowning in? His every word was a warm, gentle wave buoying her up. And suddenly she was floating.

“I messed things up this week, Abs,” he told her, leaning into the side of her body as she worked, letting his forehead rest against her temple. Protecting her from the worst of the cold, yes—and brushing his soft lips against her icy cheek, pressing his words into her skin like a secret. “I had this big plan—I was going to quit my job and move back home and work my way into your life, and then a year would pass and I’d be yours and you wouldn’t even know how it happened.”

She choked out a laugh as she gently wiped the tiny, mewling kitten semi-clean. “What?”

“Yeah. Because I could tell, even from miles away, that you were struggling, and I guess I thought I could sneak past all the walls you put up and be there for you, be *with* you, whether you liked it or not. But that was never going to work. You make choices, and they’re deliberate, and whether they keep me out or in, they’re yours. That’s one of the things I love about you. Ignoring that made no sense.”

Abbie’s pulse stuttered as she tucked the kitten close to its mother, as she turned to Will and unravelled the scarf from around *his* neck for another blanket. “Love,” she repeated carefully, swallowing hard, refusing to add any inflection. “Love.” Her lips shaped the word hungrily. And for the first time, leaning toward the most obvious interpretation of what he’d said felt less like hubris and more like hope.

“Yeah,” he told her, and she heard it in his voice, felt it in his gaze. Maybe it had always been there. Maybe the way he looked at her, like he could see every little thing—like he *wanted* to see every little thing, no matter how tough or awkward or difficult—had always been love.

And then he confirmed that possibility, with the same brilliant ease he did everything. “Yeah, I love you, Abs. It took me a while to figure out what it was—by the time I did, you were off to uni, and then you found someone else, and I felt like I’d never done anything so stupid as let you go, and it was too late. I just hope I’ve made up for it by loving you ever since.

“Because I have. I’ve loved you every second we’ve spent apart and every week we’ve spent together. I love you when you’re hurting, and I love you when you’re careful, and I love you when you’re not sure if it’s safe to love me back. I know you can’t help worrying, but I wish I’d told you from the fucking start that—that there’s nothing you can do to make me stop. I’m tried and tested, Abbie. I’ve been halfway around the world, loving you. I’ve been an usher at your fucking wedding, loving you.” He laughed, sounding genuinely disbelieving. “I literally cannot stop. And I should’ve told you before, because if there’s anything I can do to make you feel even the tiniest bit safer, I want to do that. I do. So I’m sorry. And that’s everything. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Abbie said, very, very softly. And then she was silent. She waited while Gravy’s second kitten was born, grateful beyond belief that it was done quickly. She wrapped the little snuffling thing up next to its mother and its sibling. And then, very quickly, with her filthy, gloved hands held safely out to the sides, she turned to face Will and kissed him.

He must've been surprised, because he made this baffled noise in the back of his throat, and it took him a split second to kiss her back. But he did. He couldn't touch her either, was still holding the brambles aside, and so they spent a long, hungry moment pressed together, mouth to mouth and body to body, holding each other with nothing but every emotion they poured into that kiss.

I love you, she thought, fucking wild with it, dizzy with it, breathless with it, and hoped he could taste it on her tongue, hoped he picked it up when he bit her lower lip, hoped he could feel it in the aching rock of her hips against his. Because she tasted it on him, felt it from him, heard it in those searingly honest words that ran around and around her head. *"I'm tried and tested, Abbie. I literally cannot stop."* She didn't want to need that; she wanted to simply, blithely trust him, or rather, to trust that things could be good, that nightmares weren't always waiting around the corner. But she wasn't quite there yet, and he knew it, and he didn't mind. He was willing to give her those words instead, a lifeline when she needed it, and surely he had no idea—he could have no fucking idea—how much that meant to her.

Pulling away from him might be the hardest thing she'd ever done, but they had newborn kittens out in a blizzard here, so they didn't have much of a choice. He groaned when she broke the kiss, and it was so fucking surreal how obvious this man was about wanting her. She didn't think she'd ever had that. She hadn't known she needed it.

"Kittens," she breathed. "We should ... move them."

"Yeah," he said, "yeah." Then he smiled. "Hey."

"What?"

"You're mine as fuck."

She laughed as she picked up the cats, feeling younger than she had in years, feeling the way she used to, when they were just them and nothing was complicated. “That doesn’t make any sense, William.”

“It doesn’t need to, Abigail.” He released the brambles and took the cats from her arms, ignoring his allergies as always. “Mine as fuck. Remember it.”

“I still need to—I have things I need to do,” she told him, trying not to get ahead of herself, feeling like a helium balloon. “I think I should maybe go back to therapy.”

“Probably,” he agreed as they stood up.

“Hey!”

“What? I went back to therapy after I thought I was done.”

She stared at him through the snow. “You went to therapy?”

“I lived in California. You have to do that kind of shit over there, or you’ll never fit in.” But then, after a moment, he gave her one of his rare, serious looks and said, “I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“Okay,” she said. “Thank you,” she said. *I love you*, she thought.

And like he’d read her fucking mind, he said, “I love you,” right back.

She couldn’t believe those were words they’d exchanged, never mind feelings they’d actually felt. Her heart had been swallowed up by a beam of sunshine, and she felt herself glowing all the way back to the house. They were opening the scarlet front door when it occurred to her—she wanted to give

him sunshine too, wanted to make him feel the way she did, which meant she had to give him back whatever he gave her. “I, erm ... I mean, when you said just now that you loved me, I should’ve said—”

He looked down at her, a smile in his voice and a bundle of cats in his arms. “There’s no *should*, Abs. I said I understood where you’re at, and I meant it.” She thanked God her glasses were steaming up from the house’s warmth, because if she could see his gorgeous fucking face in finer detail as he said this, she might faint with the perfection of it all. “You already told me you loved me today,” he continued. “I bet that’s you done for the rest of the week.”

She laughed, dizzy with affection, with adoration. “I can do better.”

“But I don’t want better,” he said calmly. “I like what I’ve got. You’re in charge here, you know. Anything that changes between us will be your choice.” His eyes turned her inside out. “All I ever wanted was to be yours. Am I?”

“Yes,” she breathed. *God, yes.*

He grinned, happier than she’d ever seen him. Including that one time when a butterfly had landed on his nose, which was saying something. “Then I’m good. Now call your brother and tell him to bring Ms Tricia back here. Someone smarter than us needs to take a look at these cats.”

“Oh, shit, yeah.” She took off her gloves, snatched her phone from her pocket, and followed Will into the family room as she dialled. Jase picked up while Will was bent beneath the Christmas tree, depositing Gravy and her kittens under the red-and-gold baubles.

“You found her?” was Jase’s immediate greeting.

“Yep. We’re at the house. Also, she gave birth.”

There was a shrill “What?” in the background, then a few grunts and sounds of a struggle before Grandma, predictably, took over the phone. “What happened?”

“Two kittens delivered safely,” Abbie reported, while Will gathered more blankets and dragged a few cushions off the sofa. There might be weird afterbirth stains, but she was pretty confident Grandma wouldn’t mind. “She seemed really tired and cold outside, but she’s licking the first one now, and the second one’s feeding, so that’s a good sign, right?”

“Yes,” Grandma agreed. “Well done. We’re heading back.”

Abbie felt a bit glowy about that “Well done.” Maybe listening to Chitra talk about pool births and placentas for months had made her ready for anything, or maybe her own habit of imagining worst-case scenarios had done that. Whatever the case, she was glad she hadn’t fucked up Gravy’s babies.

Putting the phone down, she relayed the message to Will. He nodded, peeled off his gloves, and reached for her. “So…” he said. One of his hands slid beneath the coat she still hadn’t taken off, settling at her hip with a possessiveness she shouldn’t enjoy so much. His other hand rose to her hair, tugging gently at a coil behind her ear. “Are we going to say anything?”

And Abbie learned another thing she hadn’t known about herself: she liked being with a man who asked instead of told. She liked it a whole fucking lot.

Were they going to tell her family, that was what Will meant. He was only asking for clarity, though, not because he *needed*

to share. Will didn't need anything right now except what he had: Abbie, looking at him with all the secret affection her dark eyes could convey, loving him silently in a way that was so fucking loud, it reverberated through his bones.

He was on cloud nine, and he expected to stay there for the rest of his life. So, yeah, he didn't need a damn thing. But after years of this hollow, hungry yearning, and a couple days of fucking things up by holding back, he'd decided that straightforward communication was his very best shot at keeping hold of this miracle.

And he would keep hold of this. Of her. Gently, yes, as gently as she needed, but he wasn't ever letting go.

She rolled her lips inward, looking adorably awkward at the prospect of talking about their feelings yet again—and to people other than each other. But he was impressed, because instead of blurting out *God, no*, with all the horror she obviously felt, Abbie took a breath and managed a smile. “I could be wrong, but I think Grandma's kind of been shipping us. She really shoved us together these last two days.”

Well, shit. That was ... that was true, wasn't it? Will grinned. “Always knew she was a woman of taste.”

“And Jase basically thinks we should get married.”

Will grinned wider. “He is my best friend for a reason.”

He could see Abbie's apprehension at that—she probably hadn't expected him to respond so enthusiastically, or so seriously. He released her hair and stroked her face, his fingertips gliding over her brow, her temple, along the line of her jaw. Everywhere he touched, tension seemed to ease out of her. “I'm just asking, Abbie,” he said softly. “I'm asking what you want to do because I care about the answer. I care about

what you want.” It had occurred to him recently, that he should tell her things like that—should say what seemed so obvious to him out loud. Because it wasn’t obvious to Abigail, and if he didn’t show her his heart, how the fuck was she supposed to learn it? He wasn’t leaving her in the dark anymore, to stumble around with nothing but her hopes and her fears.

Not ever.

She gave a tentative smile, and his heart squeezed at the sight. “Okay. Well ... I think they’d be pleased, but I also think that talking about ... about our feelings for each other was a lot, and we don’t exactly know what this is going to look like, or at least I don’t, and—”

“One year,” he said softly.

She blinked. “Hm?”

“That’s how long I was going to wait,” he reminded her, “before I asked you out. One year of being with you however you wanted before I ever brought up my feelings. I might’ve failed on the feelings part, but we can still wait a year, if you want.”

Her lips parted for a breathless moment, and she leaned into him, just a tiny bit. Just enough for him to feel the warmth of her fledging trust, chasing away the blizzard’s chill. “You’re rather dedicated,” she said dryly, but she looked at him with so much soul-deep affection he almost passed out. Really, he felt a little light-headed. The fucking *eyes* on this woman.

“Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “Dedicated. That I am.”

“And perfect,” she added quietly, fondly. “You’re rather incredibly perfect.”

“You told me you have things you need to work out,” he said, fighting the loopy grin of all time because this was supposed to be a serious adult conversation about boundaries or whatever the fuck. “So do what you gotta do, Abs, and in the meantime, I’ll still be here, and we’ll still be us. Okay?” *You’re safe with me. You’re trying for me. And you will never fucking regret it.*

She looked up at him as if she couldn’t see anything else. “Okay, Will,” she said. And then she kissed him so hard he felt weak.



Epilogue

@AbbieGrl: Have you seen this?

@DoURe1dMe: Uh ... is that supposed to be me?

@AbbieGrl: It's Captain X getting pegged by
Captain Marvel 🤖

@DoURe1dMe: INTERESTING ... how do you feel
about wearing spandex?

ONE YEAR LATER

Abbie woke to the click of the bedroom door closing. The space beside her was warm but empty. Will had just left. Cracking open one eye, she fumbled for her phone, knocking her anxiety meds off the bedside table in the process. According to her display, it was 7:38 and she had a text from Chitra.

Merry Christmas, Aunty!

Attached was a picture of baby Jaya dressed as a tiny Santa. Abbie smiled, and fell back to sleep before she could reply.

When she woke again, it was slower, sweeter, easier the second time around. Winter sun spilled through the curtains to bathe her face. The mattress beneath her shifted as Will slipped back into bed.

“Abbie-girl,” he murmured. “I’m cold.”

Such a bad liar. Will must’ve just gotten back from his run, which he insisted on every day—yes, even Christmas Day—

not because he was a gym owner who had to maintain a certain level of fitness, but because, for reasons she would never understand, he really fucking enjoyed it. So maybe he had been cold for a minute, out there in the frost. But after a couple miles and a hot shower, he must be warm again.

And yet, when his big hand smoothed over her side, she shivered.

“I know you’re awake.” She could hear the grin in his voice. Could feel it against her skin, his body curving around her as he kissed the back of her neck.

“Yes,” she admitted, “I’m awake.” Then she rolled over because neck kisses were wonderful, but mouth to mouth was better.

He was beautiful, as always. Golden and glowing and looking at her with a love so intense she could practically feel it—warming her as surely as the blankets around them, holding her tight like this bed held off the early-morning chill. Wrapped up in this man was her favourite place to be. And these days, she was confident—even in her wobbly moments—that he felt the same.

“I love you,” she murmured, and trailed her fingers down, down, down, over the planes of his beloved body.

Will grunted as his lips glided over hers. “I love you back, baby.”

She smiled against his mouth and wrapped her fingers around the hot, hard length of him. “Merry Christmas?”

“Merry fucking Christmas,” he agreed. Then he cupped her aching sex with one big palm and sucked in a breath when he found her wet.

She was still naked from last night. He was naked from the shower. He pushed her onto her back and palmed her hips with desperate hands. His body settled between her thighs, and just that—just the weight, the heat, and maybe the knowledge that he wanted her again—lit Abbie up like the spark of a match.

She wrapped her legs around him and whimpered. The first time they'd had sex, about six months ago now, she'd been quiet. Bitten her lip. Bitten her *tongue*. He hadn't told her to stop it; he'd just touched her with deliberate affection, with burning intent and shameless adoration, and he'd shown her everything he'd felt, and eventually—eventually—she'd found herself moaning beneath him one day without an ounce of self-consciousness and no idea how they'd gotten there.

Well, she supposed she had some idea. Abbie had been working hard this past year, for herself, and Will had done exactly what he'd promised to do. He'd held her hand.

Now *his* hand slid, slow and tender, up her body. Worshipping the thickness of her waist, massaging the weight of her breast, stroking the length of her throat. Enjoying, teasing, taking his fucking time. He broke their kiss to ease his thumb into her mouth, then watched with stormy eyes as she sucked, hard and wet. When she was done, he reached down between their bodies and pressed that thumb between her thighs, massaging easy circles over her swollen clit.

She swallowed a moan, not because she wanted to, but because they had to be at least a little quiet. He nuzzled her cheek, her jaw, her throat, and kept going. Kept going. Just when she thought she might beg for more, he murmured roughly, "Want it?"

"Yes."

He bit his lip, as if the word alone turned him on, and then she felt the broad head of his dick pressing her open. A slow, slick glide, his thumb still working her steadily. Everything in her tightened. He kept going, easing her through it, dragging her higher. Rocking over her, touching her, telling her in hoarse whispers, “So good, Abbie, so good.” Devouring her like he’d craved it his whole life.

She kissed him when she came.

And then again when he did, swallowing the sound of Will growling her name. He shook, he swore, and then he all but collapsed, his hoarse sounds of satisfaction spilling warm across her skin. They lay tangled together for a few breathless, sticky minutes before a bang on the door startled them both.

“Oi!” Noah’s voice came through the wood. “It’s Christmas! Stop shagging and get downstairs.”

Will burst out laughing. Once upon a time, Abbie would’ve been too mortified to join him—but it had been a few months since she and Will had, er, gone official, and her family had figured things out way before that. By this point, the teasing was almost mundane. Abbie was still chuckling when she heard another bang from down the hall. “Jason, Harlan,” Noah was shouting, “get your lazy arses up!”

“Choke,” Jase yelled back.

Another bang, this one further away. “Ma—”

“Noah Farrell, if you’ve got a brain in your head, you better watch your mouth.”

A pause. Then Noah said, a bit more quietly, “See you downstairs, Mum, love you, bye.”

Which just set Will off all over again.

He rolled over to lie against the pillows, butt naked and laughing uncontrollably. At the sight of him, Abbie's own chuckles faded, replaced by a tiny smile and a quiet swell of love, like everything in her heart had broken the banks and flooded her entire body. The ghosts of her old fears hovered in the back of her mind, but they were only that: ghosts. Scary yet transparent. Unable to truly touch her. The fact was, she adored him, and she glowed with it, fizzed with it—couldn't keep it in and didn't know how she'd ever managed to.

People coped with all sorts of things when they felt they had to. Like a flower locked in a cupboard, they'd grow desperately, instinctively toward the light, even if it required them to bend and twist and almost break. Even when you moved out of the cupboard, you still needed a little support to grow strong again.

Abbie had always had that, and lately, she'd dared to enjoy it.

“What?” Will had noticed her stare, his laughter turning into a bemused smile, his dark eyes turning her transparent as always. Beautifully so.

“I love you,” she told him simply.

His happiness was obvious. Infinite. Incandescent. But all he said was, “That's twice in one morning, Abbie-girl. You feeling the Christmas spirit?”

She leaned over to kiss the corner of his smile, the scruff over his chin, the space between those lovely eyes. “Something like that.”

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