



BABY, IT'S HOT INSIDE

A COLLECTION
OF FOUR STEAMY
HOLIDAY ROM-COMS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

baby, it's hot inside

a collection of four steamy holiday rom-coms

Kat Baxter



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baby, it's hot inside

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR, *Kat Baxter*, brings you a collection of four of her laugh-out-loud, steamy small-town holiday stories.

Craving some small-town holiday shenanigans? From tree decorating to candy canes, this collection is hot enough to warm your heart and curl your toes.

Gingerbread Kisses: A Bully Reunion/Curvy Girl Romance

The hot guy and the curvy bookworm just might find their forever underneath the mistletoe.

Mistletoe Surprise: A Best Friend's Brother/Curvy Girl

Romance One hot former marine plus one curvy girl next door equal two little pink lines.

Snowed in With the Grump: An Enemies to Lovers/Curvy

Girl Romance She was my best friend's girlfriend and I pretended to hate her when all I ever wanted to do was make her mine.

Candy Coated Curves: An Age-Gap/Boss-Assistant/Curvy

Girl Romance He's older than me. He's my boss. And I'm secretly in love with him.

Baby, It's Hot Inside

Kat Baxter

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gingerbread kisses



THE HOT GUY...

The first time I see Ginger Starr after four years of being abroad, she is wearing a hideous Christmas dress. But the obnoxious monstrosity does nothing to hide her generous curves. One thing becomes perfectly clear: I've never wanted a woman more.

...and the curvy bookworm

Brock Daniels might be ridiculously hot, but he's also my high school nemesis. I'm prepared to hate him and find him annoying with his washboard abs and toothpaste commercial smile. What I'm not prepared for is how he's looking at me... like he wants me.

...just might find their forevers underneath the mistletoe

Our parents are jointly hosting a 12 Days of Christmas party and we're stuck together. Pretending to be civil isn't that hard and one spontaneous kiss might change everything.

chapter **one**

Ginger

I NEARLY CHOKE on the swallow of coffee I've just sipped. "I'm sorry what did you say?" I peer into my coffee cup to see if there are bones or rocks in there that I might have choked on.

"Brock. He's coming back to town." My mother answers while piping icing on a snowflake shaped cookie.

Brock Daniels has always been a thorn in my side. Hot, arrogant and pretty much a dick. Me? I've always been about twenty pounds too heavy for my just barely over five foot frame which makes me seem dowdy and plain. I'm also far too sassy for my own good.

I'm Ginger Starr. Yeah, I know, it's a terrible name. But my parents are crazy about Christmas. As in my dad always plays Santa at the local mall, my mother is a wiz at cutout sugar cookies and their annual Christmas party is *the* event of the neighborhood.

It just so happens that I do have red hair but, honestly, I don't think that played too much into their naming decision. Case in point, I have an older brother named Kris (yeah, like Kris Kringle) and an older sister named Holly. So

Ginger isn't terrible in the whole scheme of things. I guess I should be happy they didn't name me Candy Cane.

"And he'll be here? Tonight? At this party? Tonight?" Why is my heart beating so fast? I'm not a kid anymore. He can't tease me if I don't let him.

She glances up at me and does nothing to hide her grin. "Yes, Ginger. Tonight. Why are you acting so strange?"

"Not strange mom, annoyed. You know Brock and I don't get along."

She chuckles. "It's called foreplay, darling."

"Nope." I shake my head. "You cannot talk about sex stuff. Ever." I swipe a cookie she's only partially iced. "Besides, Brock tormented me in high school - that is not foreplay."

"Whatever you say. Judy and I will just quietly disagree" She goes back to her cookies.

Judy is Brock's mom and my mother's partner-in-crime. They're like a slightly more competent Lucy and Ethel. And the two of them have had fantasies since Brock and I were born—only three months apart—that we'd grow up and fall in love.

"Did you get the dress I sent you?"

"Uh yeah. I'd have to be blind to have not seen it." It's a simple black mini dress because I'm roughly the size of a Hobbit with a flared skirt. But on said skirt someone—probably my mother—has painstakingly affixed giftbox bows all over it. They're in red and green and gold just in case you might not catch on that it's a Christmas dress.

She's not yet wearing her ugly sweater, but her plain white t-shirt is covered with one of her many aprons. I swear my

mother has more aprons than I have pairs of shoes. This one is red with an image of white fur trim and it boldly says, “We WHISK you a Merry Christmas!” and the letter ‘I’ in ‘whisk’ is in fact an image of a whisk. Her dark hair is cut short and has not even a hint of a wave to it. I got my hair color and curls from my father, but I can claim my mom’s big brown eyes.

“I’m surprised it doesn’t play Christmas songs when I walk.”

She stands upright and her mouth falls open. Then she grins. “That’s a brilliant idea!”

I hold up my hands in protest. “Absolutely not. It’s already going to be embarrassing enough looking like a walking present.”

“You’ll look adorable,” she says. “Your poor sister is devastated that she can’t participate this year.”

“I know. But when she finally has that sweet baby, all this forced bed rest will be forgotten.” In truth I loved the holidays just as much as my parents did. It was hard not to when I’d been raised by Sand Dollar, Texas’s equivalent of Mr. and Mrs. Clause. I wasn’t too wild about the dress, because it was pretty form-fitting, at least up top. And I didn’t like to draw attention to myself any more than my hair and short stature normally did. But I’d wear it because I loved my mom and it would make her happy. Plus it was in keeping with the “ugly” part of ugly Christmas sweater night.

“I cannot wait!” She gives a little squeal and wiggles her fingers as if she’s getting ready to tickle the baby’s belly.

“I know you can’t. I’m pretty sure you’ve wanted to be a grandma before you were even a mom.”

She winks at me. “Don’t be late tonight.”

“I won’t. Promise.” Knowing that that arrogant jerk is going to be there tonight means I’ve got to get home and...and hell, I don’t even know what I can do to prepare for seeing him again.

You know what? Not a damn thing. I don’t have anything to prove to him. He’s the one that changed. One day we’d been friends, afterschool playmates, and then middle school had hit and everything changed. We went to our first school dance together, as friends, planning to roll our eyes at our classmates. Instead, he’d danced with the most popular girl. They’d made-out under a table in the cafeteria and I’d left alone.

Needless to say, it had been a pretty shitty night. Our friendship had never been the same. That night cemented our respective high school reputations. From then on out, he was mister popularity with the hot cheerleader girlfriend. I was the hopeless nerd, standing alone in the corner.

So back to this holiday party... Normally it’s just a one-night thing. But this year my mom is using the party to launch a fundraiser for the new children’s hospital wing. So instead of one party, they’re doing a multi-day event all over town. Twelve Days of Christmas with each day having a different theme.

Tonight launches this festive shindig at my parent’s house. They’ve jumped on the bandwagon and the theme is ugly sweater. Cliched and dumb, but there you go. Which is why I’m currently wearing some obnoxious monstrosity made of thousands of those cheap stick-on bows. It’s an A-line dress, one that might even flatter my curves if it didn’t look like I’d been dipped in frosting and then rolled in tinsel. At least it

shows off my best feature; my legs. They might be short, but they're shapely.

My parents' best friends, Judy and Calvin Daniels, live right next door. Oh, did you recognize that last name? Yep, my nemesis growing up was my next door neighbor, Brock Daniels. He tormented me for years, pulling on my hair, putting frogs in my locker and using that infernal nickname he'd given me: Gingerbread. As if I didn't know I'm rounded like a loaf of bread. Bastard.

Anyways, he's been away—like out of the country away—finishing up his degree somewhere in Europe. Frankly, any time his name was mentioned, I tried not to pay attention.

Again, I eye myself in the mirror. I'm too damn short, too damn curvy and my wild red curls are ridiculous. I look like that Scottish princess from that animated movie. Though she at least had a cool accent. I have no cool accent, but I do have a pretty cool life.

I love my job. I teach kindergarten at the same elementary school that I attended. I have a tiny garage apartment, and a relatively decent social life. I go on the occasional date, though it's hard to meet people when you've lived in the same smallish town your entire life. But my girlfriends are the best. Annie has been my very best friend since third grade when her family moved to town.

She knows all about my history with Brock Daniels which is why I'm making her come to the party tonight so that I have backup for when he shows up. My mother made a point of reminding me he was coming at least three times before I left the house. The Daniels are so proud. He's their only child and just a shining star - so they say.

Insert dramatic eye roll.

By the time I arrive back at my parent's house, a few cars line their circular driveway. I scan the vehicles looking for Annie's car, but don't see it yet. I head inside to find myself a cocktail, a little proverbial liquid courage, if you will.

The only people here so far are my parents' friends, which of course include the Daniels.

Judy pulls me into a tight hug. "Ginger, you look absolutely adorable."

That's me. The adorable one. Not like my older sister who is taller so her curves are more proportional. And she has normal hair. And no freckles. But me, I'm the cute one. "Thank you," I manage to say it without rolling my eyes.

"Brock is really excited to see you again," she says.

I'll just bet he is. Excited to find something new to tease me about. I wonder who he's been tormenting all these years he's been away. I give her a tight smile and nod, keeping one eye on the door watching for Annie.

"He hasn't had much time to see many old friends since he's been in town," she continues.

I nod and take another sip of my drink.

The doorbell rings and I excuse myself hoping I'll find Annie on the other side of the door. But when the heavy wood swings open another familiar face greets me. His face splits in a grin. Those perfect white teeth, dimples peeking through the scruff on his cheeks, dark hair and Christmas green eyes. Damn, why does he have to be so pretty?

"Gingerbread," he says with that sexy grin.

And I slam the door in his face.

chapter **two**

Brock

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ME!

I laugh when she slams the door in my face, but don't let it stop me from opening it and stepping inside. Ginger has now moved away from the foyer and into the main living area where I see her parents chatting with mine. But I can't take my eyes off of the redheaded bombshell across the room.

I haven't seen Ginger Starr since the night we graduated from high school. There were things I'd meant to say to her before I left and just never got around to it. Though back then she hadn't been too keen to hear much of anything I ever said. But God I thought of her so many times over the last several years. I have a stack of postcards I bought her from every city I visited, addressed and stamped, but never mailed.

Still the same wild mane of red curls that I want to thread my fingers through. Same freckles and big brown eyes. Same short stature, but her curves are more pronounced and the maturity in her expression is intriguing. Fuck, if she's not sexier than I remember her being. Of course she'd been only eighteen then. Now, she was all woman.

Ginger glances down at her phone, then winces. She looks across the room, directly at me and I smile. Can't help it. She's adorable.

So I make my way over to her. Once I reach her, I nod towards her phone. "Bad news?"

She blows out a breath. "Annie has food poisoning so she can't make it."

"Annie Fitzpatrick? Y'all still friends?"

"We are," she says with a nod.

"I always liked her."

Her warm cinnamon-colored eyes narrow with suspicion. "Why are you being friendly?"

An instrumental version of Jingle Bells plays in the background. "Am I not allowed to be?"

"Not to me." Her arms cross over her chest which just serves in squeezing her already fantastic tits further together. Damn, she's cute when she's pissed.

I chuckle. "Since when?"

"Since forever." Her words come out in a hiss. "You don't like me. You're not nice to me."

"Gingerbread, we haven't seen each other in years."

She closes her eyes. "Ugh, that nickname."

"Here let's do this right." I hold out my hand to her. "Brock Daniels, nice to meet you."

Again she watches me through narrowed eyes, but finally she extends her hand.

The moment our palms touch I swear some sort of electrical surge pumps through the room. But none of the lights flicker. She clearly feels it too, though, because she quickly pulls her hand back.

“We used to be friends, yeah?” I ask.

“When we were little kids.”

“You were my favorite person to run around with outside.” I smile at her again. “You look good, Ginger. Really good.” I let myself take in her curves, and my eyes get caught on the sexy as fuck cleavage she’s showing.

“Until you decided I wasn’t cool enough for you.”

I sigh. She’s not entirely wrong, but I guess I’d hoped we could just forget about high school and it’s stupid teenage politics.

I nod to the empty glass she set next to her discarded phone, on side table behind her. “Where can I get one of those?”

“This way.” She spins and walks out of the room.

And I follow because damn if that dress isn’t doing amazing things for her body. Which frankly doesn’t make sense because the bow-encrusted monstrosity is ugly as hell. Looks like Christmas threw up all over her skirt. But it still hugs her just right, accentuating her narrow waist and hips that I could really grab onto.

She brings me into the kitchen where I find a sizable display of food and drinks. But she waits, standing in the entryway.

“You should be able to find whatever you want in here.”

I look down at her and take in her face. She’s really pretty.

“None of your crowd will be here tonight.” She tugs on one of her curls and I find myself longing to do the same. “Your mom said you hadn’t seen anyone yet.”

“I wouldn’t call them my crowd. Just people I hung with in high school.” People I let dictate who I was because I was too chicken shit to stand up to them and be myself. I admit, I got wrapped up in the whole popular stuff. I played football and dated the head cheerleader and we were Homecoming King and Queen three years running. That seems like a lifetime ago and I don’t think about those people anymore. Ever. But Ginger...

She tilts her head back, and gasps, and I follow her gaze.

Mistletoe. “I’m right where I want to be with who I want to talk to.” I smile down at her and lean in for a kiss. But at the last minute she turns her head and my lips press into her cheek.

I chuckle and she squeezes past me to leave the room.

She evaded that kiss, but I know one thing for sure. I’m not done with Ginger Starr.

chapter **three**

Ginger

THE FIRST THING I realize when I wake up is that I overslept and it's because I don't have my phone. I search my bed and the nightstand, but there's no sign of it. The clock across the room lets me know that it's already ten-thirty. I never sleep this late.

I probably slept in because I was awake half the night replaying my interaction with Brock. Why was he being so nice to me? And why was he looking at me like I was a delectable piece of dessert he was dying to try?

That kiss, too. If I hadn't turned my head, he would have kissed me. Like for real kissed, with his lips on mine. Like an idiot, I realize my fingertips are pressed to my mouth right now.

Get it together, girl!

I climb out of bed and race through my small apartment looking for my phone, but it's nowhere to be found, which means one thing...I left it at my parents' house. I quickly shower and throw on some shorts and a t-shirt because even though we're really close to Christmas, this is south Texas and it's still hitting the nineties at the heat of the day. This sultry

weather might not seem Christmassy to some, but it's what I know, and it works for me. Especially since I've had my Christmas playlist going since the beginning of November. I know! I'm one of those.

My hair is a mop of wet ringlets by the time I pull my car into my parents' driveway. The only other car here is a big black truck I don't recognize. But I head into their house.

"Mom, it's just me, I think I left my phone here last night."

Brock steps out of the kitchen like he's been waiting in there since I left him last night. I stop walking just before I run into the wall. He's dressed in different clothes and I can't help but appreciate the way his faded navy blue t-shirt molds to his broad, muscular shoulders. Or the way his worn jeans hang low on his narrow waist, accenting the muscular width of his thighs. He was always fit—he played football in high school. He went to France to go to college and study art history, yet he looks like he just worked out the whole time and perfected his already impressive form.

Then my mind catches up and I pause. "Wait a minute, why are you here?"

"Morning to you, too." He hands me my phone. "You left this here and no one could get in touch with you. Your mom didn't want you finding your phone and all the missed calls and messages while you were alone. Your dad is in the ER and I'm here to take you up there."

My heart plummets and my stomach knots. "Oh my God! Does my sister know? Did anyone get in touch with my brother?" I look blankly at my phone, and see the barrage of notifications, then I glance up at Brock to see nothing but concern on his face. "What happened?"

He reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. “He had some chest pains. They’re evaluating him. He never lost consciousness or anything and your mom said he was flirting with the EMT’s, so I think he’s probably okay.”

My heart slows enough that the pounding disappears. I intentionally deepen my breathing to calm myself. I will not be helpful at all to my mom if I get to the hospital and I’m in a panic. “I’ve got to get to the hospital.”

Brock hands me a travel coffee mug. “I took a guess at how you like your coffee. Hope it’s okay.”

I nod numbly. “Thanks.”

“I’m not sure if your mom got a hold of Holly or Kris. He’s kinda hard to get in touch with though, isn’t he? He’s still in the military?”

“Yeah, I’ll see if Holly can send him an email. Though maybe I should wait until I know more. No need to worry everyone until we know what we’re dealing with.”

He wraps one of his long arms around my shoulders and guides me to the front door. “Come on. I’ll drive you.”

“That’s your truck,” I say stupidly.

“Yes. We might need a pole-vault to get you up there, Short-stuff.” His voice is teasing, but there is still nothing but honest concern in his eyes.

I realize with alarming clarity that this is not the same Brock who used to tease me in high school, nor the boy I used to play with. This is adult Brock. Man Brock. He’s a stranger to me now, and I’m not really sure what to do with that realization.

He pushes a button on his remote and a running board drops down. I step up on it, but it's still too low for me to reach the elevated seat.

“Dammit, being short sucks.”

“Maybe it has its perks.” And with that he lifts me up by the waist and sets me into the seat. His hands are so hot I can feel them through the cotton of my shirt. I suck in a breath, but try to not have any other sort of reaction. He does not need to know that he's the first man to touch me in months.

“Thanks.”

Then he's in on his side and we're driving to the hospital.

“He's still young,” I mumble.

“What?” he asks.

“My dad. He's still young. I mean I know he's in his sixties, but that's not that old.”

Brock reaches over and puts his hand over mine, gives it a squeeze. But he doesn't move it away, just leaves his giant hand across my much smaller one, and I find the weight and warmth of it incredibly comforting.

“He's going to be okay,” he says. “When your mom called me, I could hear him laughing in the background.”

The last bits of panic inside me ease and I close my eyes for a moment. “Thanks for waiting for me.” Then I take a sip of the coffee and moan at the sweet, creamy flavor. “This is perfect.”

He glances over with a smile. “You always did like sweet things.”

“Why do you remember that?”

“I remember all kinds of things about you.”

His admission could mean just about anything, but the words—like the coffee—warm me from the inside.

“You’re different than how I remember.”

“Yeah?” he asks. “How’s that?”

“Do you not remember putting frogs in my locker freshman year? And not just any frogs, but all the partially dissected ones from biology lab.” I shudder at the memory. “I had to switch lockers because the formaldehyde smell never would go away.” I glance over at him and he’s unapologetically laughing. Still his hand is over mine. He squeezes me again.

“Or what about the time you dressed up like me for Halloween? You wore that ridiculous Ronald McDonald wig. My hair is not orange.”

He moves his hand from mine, but to wipe the tears leaking from his eyes as he continues to laugh.

“I was such a dick,” he finally says.

“Yes, yes you were.”

“I’m sorry, Gingerbread. I don’t even have an excuse other than to say that I was an idiot. That, and teasing you was the only way to get you to talk to me. Otherwise, it was the cold shoulder as if we’d never known each other. As if we hadn’t spent our childhoods climbing trees and riding our bikes and making plans for our secret clubs.”

I smile because I can’t not when I think about all those memories. I had a great childhood all because of my family, and because of Brock. We used to have so much fun together, then middle school happened.

He only teased me to get me to talk to him? Does he expect me to believe that?

A few minutes later, we get to the hospital and he leads me in. We ask a couple of questions at the front desk and are sent upstairs to cardiac-unit waiting room. While we're in the elevator, Brock reaches over and grabs my hand, threading our fingers together. I watch the whole thing and can't take my eyes off our joined hands. What is happening?

Then I think back to all the times he'd held my hand when we were kids. When we'd sit on the sand, after digging for crabs, and we'd just watch the waves roll in and out, he'd hold my hand. When we'd swing on the playground, he'd always hold my hand because if we got out of sync with our swinging it made things more wobbly and fun. His family was very affectionate. Huggers, cheek kissers, you know the types.

He's just being supportive and friendly. That's all this is. And the fact that my body is reacting is just confusion because of the emotional roller coaster with worrying about my dad. Also because I haven't been with anyone since jackass Jeff.

We round the corner and find Brock's parents sitting in the waiting room.

I drop his hand when I see his mother eyeing us suspiciously.

"Have you heard anything yet?" I ask.

She pulls me into her arms and tears prick at my eyes. See? Hugger. Also, damn moms and their magic tear-inducing hugs.

"He's okay, sweetie. Causing all kinds of problems back there." She smiles and there is no worry in her face at all. "They're running some tests, but they've ruled out a heart attack, so that's good."

The relief washing through my body is almost too much, and I nearly fall into a seat behind me. I take a sip of the coffee again and relish the surge of sugar and caffeine as it hits my blood stream. I glance over at Brock who has sat beside me. “Thank you for this.” I hold up the travel mug.

He nods.

His dad stands, stretching, and I realize that he looks very much like an older version of Brock. More gray in his hair, a little padding around his middle, but tall and strong with those big man hands.

What in the actual hell is wrong with me that I’m checking out Mr. Daniels’s hands?

“If y’all are going to be here for a while, I think Judy and I will head down to the cafeteria and find some coffee of our own.” He holds his hand out to his wife.

“Yeah, go ahead. Thanks for coming with my mom.”

She squeezes my shoulder as they walk away.

“No heart attack is good,” Brock says in a low voice when we’re alone again.

“Yes, it is.” I’ve got my legs folded up underneath me, and I’m gripping the travel mug with both hands.

“So what happened with us? Why did you suddenly stop being my friend?” he asks.

I turn my head and stare at him, looking for a smile that lets me know he’s kidding. But he’s not smiling. His face is full of sincerity. Damn, he’s pretty. Stupid brown hair that looks soft. Stupid green eyes that remind me of my favorite color. Stupid mouth that isn’t smiling highlighting how perfectly shaped his lips are.

“You really don’t know?”

He shakes his head. “No clue. I know that one day we were friends and the next you ignored me. Or glared at me.”

I blow out a breath. I wasn’t prepared to talk about this today. “Do you remember our first school dance?”

“Eighth grade, right?”

I nod. “We went together. Decided we would just go and laugh at the way people danced. Half an hour into the night, you disappeared to go to the bathroom. The rest of the evening you spent with your face attached to Chelsea’s.” I shrug. “I wasn’t jealous or anything. You just made your choice. The popular crowd picked you and I was the geeky girl with her nose in a book. I didn’t fit into your world anymore.”

His eyes close and he rubs a hand down his face. “I didn’t pick her over you. I still wanted to hang out with you. I wanted your friendship.”

“You didn’t have time for me. Especially once high school started. You had football and your cheerleader princess girlfriend and your ‘bros.’” I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter anymore. All water under the proverbial bridge.”

He glances over at me, all sincerity in his features. “I’m sorry, Ginger. If I could do things over again, I would have made different choices” He reaches over and fingers one of the russet-colored ringlets resting on my shoulder. “Think we can start over and be friends again?”

His question makes my heart tighten and I don’t understand what that’s all about. “I’ll consider it,” I tell him.

We sit in silence for a few moments, the buzz of the waiting room television in the background. I can’t see it from

this angle, but I can tell that it's on some twenty-four hour news station.

“You and Chelsea keep in touch while you were in Europe?” It's been on my mind and I've tried not to ask, but we've already talked about her now. The seal has been broken, and damn if I don't want to know if he's planning to reunite with his high school girlfriend.

He chuckles low. “No. We didn't exactly leave things on the best of terms.”

“How so?”

“She wanted to go with me. Her parents offered to pay for everything, get us a flat to share and the whole nine yards, but I didn't want her there. I wanted to go on my own.”

“See the world outside of our small ocean-side town?”

“Exactly. Plus my grandfather had left me money for school. Enough for me to go wherever I wanted. I wanted to follow in his footsteps, study history. Though instead of the American History he loved, I wanted to focus on art history. I knew Chelsea would never understand that. She'd get bored that I wasn't devoting all my time to her.”

His words warmed me. I'd loved his grandfather and all his cool retelling of the American Revolution and the Civil War. If you can talk about that stuff and catch the interest of a child... yeah he was amazing.

“She came once. To Paris. She thought if I saw her, I'd want her to stay. But I left here for a reason and she was a big part of that. I wanted to be done with high school and the popularity game. People like Chelsea peak in high school. Though she'll always be financially solvent because of her

family, she'll never truly accomplish anything because she's still stuck on being the Homecoming Queen."

I am, admittedly, fascinated by his story. It's probably not nice of me, but I never did like Chelsea and there's a twisted part of me that would have enjoyed watching him reject her. "What did you do when she got there?"

"I told her to leave. That I meant it when I ended things with her. She was beyond pissed. We haven't talked much since. Exchanged a couple of emails, but that's it. I don't even know if she knows I'm back in town."

The thought of that does funny things to my stomach, but I shove it away.

"What about you? What did you do after graduation?"

"Went to college, got my teaching degree, and came back here to teach. That's basically it."

"Did you leave a trail of broken hearts in your wake?"

I snort. SNORT! I am hopelessly goofy. "Hardly. I had one boyfriend. His name was Jeff and we were together for three years. But we broke up."

"Mutual?" he asks.

"Uh, I guess. He thought he should get to continue sleeping with someone else and I disagreed."

"Damn."

"Yeah. I was naive. Stupid." I shrug against his shoulder.

He lifts my head briefly to snake his arm around me, and then pulls me back to him. "It's not naive to assume your partner is being faithful. I'm assuming y'all were sleeping together?"

I sigh. “He was my first.” And only, but I leave that part out.

“You haven’t dated anyone since?”

“I’ve had a handful of first dates, but that’s it. I never seem to click with anyone. I tend to attract older men who have a gross young girl fetish—I guess because I’m short they can pretend I’m younger than I am. Only went out with one to figure that out.” A shudder creeps through me.

The double doors leading back to the examination rooms open and my mom comes out. I jump to my feet and run to her, and she squeezes me tight. She looks over my head and smiles at Brock.

“Thanks for bringing her.”

“Of course. My parents went to get coffee, do you need anything?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks, Brock.”

“So what is going on with Dad, is he okay?”

My mother’s cheeks tint pink and she looks down at the floor. “Evidently he has a minor heart issue that has been undiagnosed thus far, and it interacted poorly with his ED medicine.”

“Fuck,” Brock whispers from behind me.

“ED?”

“Erectile dysfunction,” my mother says looking me straight in the eyes.

I want the floor to open up and swallow me whole. OH. MY. GOD. I’m pretty sure I look like that shocked-face emoji right now. Or maybe the blushing one.

“Now then,” my mom continues as if she did not just talk about my father’s malfunctioning penis and their sex life all in one breath. “Today is the second day of the fundraiser and I’m not sure when I’ll be able to leave here. You know how hospitals are. I need you to handle things for me at the beach.”

My brain isn’t quite working yet because I’m still stuck on the fact that my mother said *erectile* in front of me and Brock. But I can be mature about this and I pretend the last three minutes didn’t happen. “What’s on the agenda today?”

“It’s the build-a-sandman competition, down on Windsor beach. I’ve already set up everything. Judy can’t help today because she’s got to get all the baking done for the gingerbread competition in two days.”

“Are you sure I can just leave you here? You don’t need me to stay?”

My mom smiles. “No, baby, I’m fine. Promise. And your dad is fine. Though I might kill him if he keeps causing trouble. He’s trying to get the orderlies to coordinate a wheelchair race with the patients.”

Brock barks out a laugh. “That sounds like your dad.”

I ask her about my siblings and she assures me everyone has been notified. Then Brock’s parents return and our moms immediately start in on the plans for the remaining days of the fundraiser.

“We’ve got it under control,” Brock says. Then he’s grabbing my arm and tugging on me.

I let him pull me away and it’s not until we’re in the elevator that everything hits at once. I double over in a fit of the giggles.

“Oh my God, I did not ever need to know that,” I say in between my laughs. I swipe at the tears streaming down my face.

“Me neither,” he agrees. “About your parents. Or anyone’s parents, for that matter.” Then he shrugs. “Though I guess it’s good to know we can have sex well into marriage.”

We.

WE?

We can have sex.

My mind is playing the words on repeat like it’s an old record player stuck on a scratch.

I follow him to his truck, and then suddenly he’s standing really close to me. His six-foot frame towers over me, as I look up into his face. That infernal grin of his. I really wanted to dislike him, but I just can’t. He’s been so great today. Sweet and supportive. He even apologized for some of his high school antics. We both did, I guess. I can’t say that I didn’t play some part in our rift.

“You owe me a kiss,” he said. His eyes dropped to my mouth.

“How do you figure?”

“Twice now you’ve gotten out of it. Last night under the mistletoe.” He ticked off one finger. “Then our sophomore year, you snuck off before our seven minutes in heaven.” He ticked off a second finger.

“First of all, you did kiss me last night. Just not on my lips. As for that stupid kissing game, I didn’t even want to play. And you had a girlfriend.”

“We weren’t together for more than half of that year,” he reminds me. “So you can’t use her as an excuse.”

I just look at him until he raises his brows making it clear he’s still waiting on my answer. “I ran off because I didn’t want my first kiss to be part of some dare.”

He tips my chin up with a nudge of a finger. “That means...”

“Yeah, I was sixteen and never been kissed. I didn’t think you needed more fodder to tease me.”

“I would have loved to have been your first kiss.”

His thumb swipes along my bottom lip, and every erogenous zone in my body goes on high alert. I swear I can almost hear alarms going off.

“I’m going to kiss you now, Ginger.”

And that’s all the warning I get before his lips brush against mine. Little nips at the corners of my mouth. He cradles my face and I melt a little.

HOLY SHIT BROCK DANIELS IS KISSING ME!

Yes, that needed to be yelled. His fingers dive into my curls, and he deepens the kiss. There’s a sexy slide of his tongue across the seam of my mouth. I don’t need any more encouragement to open my mouth. And then our tongues are together. He tilts my head and I kiss him back with ferocity. I would have loved for him to have been my first kiss too. But somehow this seems perfect.

We are full on making out while he presses me against his truck. My toes curl inside my slip-on sneakers, and I arch against him, rubbing my hard nipples against his chest. He growls into my mouth, lifts me off my feet, and I wrap my legs

around his waist. Then I feel it, that hard-as-a-pipe erection against my stomach. No dysfunction here, thank you very much. I want to grind against him, but his kiss is melting my brain. So hot.

He ends the kiss and presses his forehead to mine. “Fuck, Ginger.” His voice is all growly and deep with lust and I’m pretty sure my panties have melted.

“As much as I want to fuck you right here...one, we’re in the hospital parking lot and two, we told your mom we’d do something for her.”

Voice of reason. I fucking hate the voice of reason. I try to lower my legs from his body, but he grips my thighs and bends his head to meet my gaze.

“This is not over. Do you understand me? We’re not done here.”

I swallow and nod, but my mouth seems to have forgotten how to make words. Thankfully my brain is working enough for me to agree with him that we’re not done. He’s in town for Christmas and I think having a holiday fling with him would be the very best present I could give myself.

chapter **four**

Brock

I DROPPED her off at her parents' house and we both went to our respective places to change for the beach activities. We hadn't talked much on that drive and I hadn't touched her. I was too damn tempted to pull her into my lap and finish what we'd started.

I'm still hard from that kiss. Goddamn she felt good in my arms, her tongue on mine, the heat from her pussy pressed against my cock. Even through our clothes, I had been able to feel her.

I'd gone back to my new condo to change my clothes, and thought of two things. One: fucking Ginger until neither one of us can walk. And two: our conversation at the hospital. I had ignored her the rest of that dance. I'd been so caught up in kissing Chelsea that I hadn't been able to think beyond my hormones. But it hadn't been a conscious decision to leave Ginger behind. I should have fought harder for our friendship. And now I found myself wanting a hell of a lot more than friendship with her.

Friendship first though.



Every once in a while, on those super rare occasions, it has gotten cold enough here in Sand Dollar to snow on the beach. That's happened maybe twice in my twenty-four years, and both of those times were after December. So we can't build snowmen; no, here we build sandmen.

By the time I park my truck in the Windsor Beach lot the beach is already dotted with people. I spot Ginger immediately. She's hard to miss with her flaming red curls, even if they are currently piled on top of her head in a messy wad. Beyond that she still would catch my attention... because fuck me...

She's wearing one of those retro bikinis I've seen on the old pinup girls. Navy blue with big white polka dots. My mouth waters as I scan her curves. The top ties around her neck and cradles her tits in the best way. The bottom is some kind of high-waisted tight skirt thing. I wipe my hand down my face to try and gain some control over myself because what I want to do is grab her, toss her over my shoulder and bring her home to spend the rest of the day worshipping her body. She looks hot as fuck.

Instead, I jog over to her. A good chunk of the town has come out for this event and there are a lot of kids here. I flip my cap around backwards. I don't want anything blocking my view of her. When I reach her side I can't not touch her so I wrap my hand around her bare bicep. Her skin is warm and impossibly soft. I lean down to her ear.

“Are you trying to kill me?”

She looks at me with a bewildered frown. “What?”

I let my eyes take in the sweet sight of her. “You look amazing in that.”

Her mouth opens in an ‘O’ but she doesn’t say anything. Then she smiles and looks away. Like she doesn’t get it. How is it even possible that she doesn’t know how hot she is? Has no man ever told her? Did that fuckhead from college never tell her she’s beautiful and sexy? Idiot.

I didn’t come back to Texas looking for a relationship. Yeah, I wanted to rekindle my friendship with Ginger, I’d missed her all these years. But right now, I want her so much that I can’t imagine NOT wanting her. I don’t know what that means for our future, but I’m ready to explore it.

“You ready to do this?” I ask her.

“Yeah. I got several of the groups started already.” She motions to the people who are already busy packing their sand with water to shape it into a snowman-looking thing.

“Miss Starr, Miss Starr, look!” a little voice behind us calls.

Ginger’s face transforms into a brilliant smile when she turns around and trots over to the kiddo calling her. I try not to notice Ginger’s ass as she moves away from me. But I fail miserably because while her bikini bottoms are a skirt from the front, it’s clearly a fake skirt. In the back they’re tight shorts that cup her rounded ass in the most wicked way. I’m pretty sure my mouth is open. I might be drooling.

Get a grip, man. She’s just a woman.

But even as I think that thought, I know it’s just not true. Ginger is different in all the best ways. And I know I’m in trouble because I’m pretty sure she’s about to change my life. As if moving back to my small Texas beach town to open an

art gallery with the rest of my grandfather's money isn't life altering enough.

I watch her with the group of kids who called her over, and she gets down on her knees in the sand to meet them at eye level. And they talk and laugh and she points on their sandman, offering what I'm assuming are suggestions. The kids have gathered some seaweed, and they're trying to affix it to the head.

"It's like you!" one of them says, pointing at the swirling seaweed.

Yeah, I guess it does kinda look like her curls, only it's green and slimy. But it's a sweet effort. I glance around the beach and see so many of the people from town. Working together, playing together. There's a lot about Europe that is amazing, but nothing is quite like home. I had some qualms about coming back, felt like I'd made the decision so I could be close to my parents. It doesn't feel like that now though. It feels like I've made the choice for me.

She finishes with the kids and walks back to me. "Did you want to try and make one?"

My heart stops and I'm pretty sure I'm gaping at her. I look back over at the kids. Then it dawns on me that she's not asking if I want to make a child with her, she's asking about building a sandman. I chuckle, but don't clue her in on my wayward thoughts.

"Nah, I really am just enjoying watching everyone else." I rub at the back of my neck. "I don't think I ever truly appreciated our town and the charm of our beach and all of this." I open my arms wide then spin to face the ocean. The Gulf of Mexico is ugly compared to lots of other big bodies of water. It's kinda greenish-brown because of the constant

churning and the oil rigs, but it's still pretty. The sand is white and full of shells.

"I love it here. Can't imagine living anywhere else," she says.

I reach down and grab her hand, twining our fingers together. "Will you come over tonight? I can make us dinner."

She turns to face me with a grin. "You cook?"

"I learned a few tricks while I was away. If that doesn't work out, we can always order pizza."

She bites down on her lip, and I swear I could get lost in the chocolaty depths of her eyes. "Okay."

I squeeze her hand. "It's cute that they're making that one look like you." I nod to the group of kids.

"Former students. They're sweet kids."

"You're good with them."

She shrugs. "It's my job."

"Nah, it's more than that."

"Thanks. I like kids, so it's easy. They don't judge me for being goofy or too short. The girls think I have princess hair and they all like that I use funny voices when I read." She smiles. "Kids get me."

"And you get them. You want some of your own someday?"

She looks up at me. "Yes. I've wanted to be a mom for as long as I can remember. Used to make my mom a little nervous when I was in high school."

I laugh and squeeze her hand again. And without even trying, I can imagine a future with her. With us. Kids, a house,

my gallery. I let go of her hand and take a step back.

“Do you have any food allergies I should know about?”

“No, I’m not too picky.”

I nod.

“Can you help with carrying some of the sand and water to the new groups?” She motions to the groups that are walking up.

“Sure. I’ll see you at my place, say seven o’clock?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll text you the address.” And because I just can’t help it, I lean down and press a kiss to her forehead before I walk away.

chapter **five**

Ginger

“SO WHAT WAS ALL THAT ABOUT?”

I turn to find my best friend, Annie, watching Brock’s retreating form.

I can’t help the smile on my face. In fact, it’s making my cheeks hurt a little. “We were making plans for tonight.” Then I pause, noting Annie’s face. Her normally golden complexion is a little pale and her razor straight black hair is ruffled. “You still look terrible. You feeling better at all?”

“Still a little green, but so much better. That is the last time I eat at Mr. Fu’s Buffet.” She puts her hand on her stomach.

“Thank you for coming to help me even though this is not your thing.”

“Maybe I’ll make a sand Menorah.” She grins. “What is the point of being the only Chinese Jewish woman in town if I can’t do stuff like that?”

“Have I told you lately you’re my favorite?”

“No, you have not. But I want to talk about something else.” She points down the beach a ways where Brock—now shirtless—is hauling a five-gallon bucket of water. “So a date?”

With Brock Daniels, your nemesis? Isn't that what you've always called him?"

I blow out a breath, and tilt my head back peering at the cloudless blue sky. "He apologized. I mean, not specifically for everything he did, but he admitted he was a real dick in high school. We actually talked about all of that and it turns out I wasn't entirely blameless."

Her thin black eyebrows arch.

"He's been really sweet. Especially at the hospital with my dad."

"Oh yeah, how's he doing?"

I roll my eyes. "Aside from my mom oversharing about his erectile problems, he's doing great. Can't even tell he had an episode or whatever it was."

"That's good. Back to Brock." We both tilt our heads to better see the curve of his ass as he bends over to help somebody. "You're going to go out with him?"

"He's cooking for me. Tonight." I have to resist the urge to do a happy dance.

"Wow, that's sweet and romantic." She narrows her eyes at me. "Has he kissed you?"

I cannot help how wide my smile gets. I put my hands on my cheeks. "Amazing." It's all I can say. I sling my arm around my best friend and pull her to me. "I'm totally going to sleep with him. Enjoy that body and his toe-curling kisses while he's in town. I deserve a fling with a super-hot guy." It's totally my plan, but I can't deny that my words feel a little false.

“OMG! He’s going to fall madly in love with you, and then the two of you are going to live happily ever after and make beautiful babies together. I’ll take all the pictures for everything.”

I laugh. “You are ridiculous. And way too much of a romantic. Though I do appreciate your photography skills.”

“Nah, I’m a realist.”

“I’m sure he’ll be back in France or wherever he’s living now before anything crazy like that happens. This is just a tryst.”

“Such a dirty word for Sand Dollar’s favorite kindergarten teacher.” She tsks her tongue.

My smile disappears, and the thought that keeps plaguing my brain surfaces. “He’s way too hot for me, but I don’t even care.”

“Bite your tongue, Ginger Starr!” Annie says with a punch to my side.

“I know, I’m fabulous. I’m comfortable with who I am, but I also know my limitations. Someday I’ll get my happy ending, it’ll just be with a regular looking guy. Someone who will totally have a dad bod in five years.”

“Oh my God, you’re so stupid. Don’t say stupid shit like that. He is not too hot for you. If anything you’re too good for him.”

“You’re just saying that because you love me.”

“I do love you, but that is completely beside the point. That man was whistling when he walked away from you. Grinning like a lovesick fool. Don’t sabotage this because of some weird misguided belief. Or because you’re believing all

that bullshit that asshole Jeff told you.” She grabs both of my hands and squeezes them. “Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“And also promise that you’ll call me tomorrow morning and give me all the juicy details.”

“Why tomorrow morning?”

“Because the juicy details will all be happening tonight.” She waggles her eyebrows. “I’m hoping I’ll be far from your mind tonight.”

And then it hits me. I feel my eyes go wide. I’m going to get naked with him. See his naked body. We’re going to totally do naked stuff together. “I’m going to have sex with Brock.”

“One can only hope.”

chapter **six**

Ginger

IT TOOK me forever to figure out what to wear. He seemed to like my swimsuit so much I was tempted to leave it on, but I couldn't figure out an excuse that would legitimize that choice. So instead I settled on a black halter dress with a flared skirt. It's cute but also sexy, and the best part is its really comfortable, so I won't be spending my time tugging on the fabric trying to cover my squishy bits.

I follow the directions to the address he texted me and I realize that it's not a hotel. And obviously not his parent's place because I wouldn't have needed directions there. So I'm confused when I get to the old Barnaby's Shoe store downtown. But I follow his instructions to go around to the side and climb the steps.

He opens the door and he's got a dish rag slung over one shoulder. His green button-up shirt has the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. And damn, I cannot be the only woman in the world who thinks that look is beyond sexy. His forearms are tanned and muscular, and there's this vein going up one of them...and damn again. So hot.

“Wow, you look amazing.” His words ring true as does the expression on his face as his eyes eat me up.

I could get used to him looking at me like this. Brock Daniels. What is happening to my life?

Thank God he can't hear my inner voice, he'd think I had lost my mind.

“Come in.” He moves out of the way and holds the door for me.

“Smells good in here.”

“Nothing too exciting, just some herb baked chicken and twice baked potatoes. Salad.” He puts a hand to the small of my back and leads me in. “You're not one of those women who doesn't eat carbs, are you?”

I snort. “No. I probably wouldn't look like this if I stopped eating carbs. I like bread. And potatoes. And cake.”

“You look good to me.” His voice is behind me, close to my ear and then his mouth nips at the exposed part of my shoulder.

I shiver and hold my breath a bit waiting to see if he does anything else. I've never had casual sex. Jeff and I waited until we'd dated a couple of weeks before we did it. So I don't really know how this is done.

He steps away from me. “Do you want the grand tour now or after we eat?”

I glance around enough to see that while this apartment is very nice and modern, it's a studio, just one big open space with two doors off to the back—the bathroom and closet, I'm assuming. I laugh. It's really nice. A little too nice for a holiday stay, but it's been so long since he's been home,

maybe he's planning to stay for an extended period. I know that's how Europeans do things. Their vacations are always a couple of months it seems.

"I like the exposed brick and beams."

"Yeah, me too. Reminds me of a couple of places I've stayed in France." He leads me over to the kitchen area and helps me onto a bar stool. "I don't have room for a table so this will have to do."

"It's perfect. I think is bigger than my apartment. It's definitely nicer. Then again I am a public school teacher." My eyes go to the far side of the room where an enormous king-sized bed sits. Covered in all white linens it looks like something out of a luxury hotel. I look back at him to find him watching me. He hands me a plate and then settles on the barstool next to me with his own.

We eat in silence for a few moments.

"How's your dad?"

"He's good. Adjusting to his new blood pressure medicine which I guess can make him a little tired while his body gets used to it." I take a few more bites. "This is really delicious. I've never had a man cook for me before." Then I wince. "Gah, I'm really bad at that. Just saying whatever is on my mind. Oversharing, people have called it."

He frowns, glances at me. "Doesn't seem like oversharing to me. We're not exactly strangers. And I like hearing about you."

"Jeff always told me I talked too much and that no one needed to know every thought that came to mind."

"Jeff sounds like a dumbass."

I grin at him. “That’s what Annie calls him.”

“It’s refreshing that you’re honest. And that you’re not pretending to be someone you aren’t. I can tell you from experience that that is exhausting.”

“So how long are you staying?” I ask.

“Staying?”

“Here? In Sand Dollar?”

He swallows, then takes a sip of his wine. “Didn’t your mom tell you? I’m back. For good.”

The food I’ve just swallowed forms a knot in my throat and I take a swig of water to keep from choking. “Uh, no, she must have forgotten to mention it.” Danger, Will Robinson. I’m on a date. An actual date. This can’t be a short holiday fling. He’s not leaving. He’s here to stay. I slowly exhale to try and slow my heart rate.

“The old shoe store below,” he continues. “I bought it. I’m turning it into an art gallery to showcase mostly local artists. Sculpture, jewelry, photography, you name it, I want to feature it.

“Here in our podunk beach town?”

“Yep. I want to bring a little bit of European charm here. It’ll work. Promise.” He rubs his hand at the back of his neck. “I’m already working on getting a little cafe opened down there too. It’ll be a whole experience. We’ve got a great historic downtown.”

“So you’re here to stay. And this is your actual apartment?”

His brow furrows. “Did you think I was just blowing through town?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

We finish eating while he tells me about the layout of the gallery and his vision for it.

I’m only half listening. Not because I’m not interested, I am. I’m already thinking of how the school could have field trips there and maybe featured artists could come and talk to my class. But mostly I’m trying to figure out what to do about tonight. I came here with the intention of sleeping with him. But I’d planned on something brief. Something too fast for me to develop feelings because the last time I fell for a guy he broke my heart. And I know that Brock could do way more damage.

“Do you want more wine?” he asks.

I nod and he fills my glass with the golden-colored wine. “This is really delicious.”

“Dessert? I didn’t make anything, but I’ve got some gelato we could share.”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Hey, are you nervous? It’s just me.” He twirls one of my curls around his finger. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. I just wanted to spend some more time with you.”

But I do want to do all the things. I totally do. So I stop thinking so hard and just pull him to me. Our lips meet and he tastes like wine and promises.

“Just so you know,” he says, pulling away from our kiss. “I do want you. It’s all I’ve been able to think about since our kiss this morning.”

“I want you too.”

“Thank fuck.” He pulls me to my feet and kisses me again. His tongue delves into my mouth as he walks me backwards across his apartment. He spins us, then I’m pulled across his lap, straddling his thick thighs. His hands move up the sides of my torso until his thumbs are resting just below my breasts. I’m dying for him to touch them. My nipples might poke through the dress if he doesn’t do it soon. But he’s in no hurry, just keeps kissing me.

“You’re a really good kisser,” I tell him, when his mouth leaves mine to trail his tongue down my throat. Goosebumps scatter across my skin.

“So are you.”

I grip his shoulders, they’re so firm, like muscles on top of muscles.

“I want to touch you everywhere. See you,” he murmurs into my throat. “Stand up, Ginger.”

I do as he instructs and I slip off my black ballet flats and kick them somewhere behind me.

He’s sitting on the foot of his bed watching me. His mossy green eyes are so heated as they track my body. “Take off your dress.”

I reach behind me and unhook the halter, then shimmy out of the dress until I’m there in my black strapless bra and matching black underwear. They’re not sexy lingerie. I’ve had no reason to buy such things, but they’re better than basic white cotton.

“Come here.” He holds a hand out to me and I pad to him.

“Take off your shirt now,” I tell him.

And he does and my mouth falls open. Watching him across the beach earlier today didn't do him justice. He was too far away to truly appreciate. I don't think I've ever seen a chest like that in real life. In movies. On Jason Momoa and Ryan Reynolds, but on a real man? Nope. Especially not one I'm currently standing in front of wearing nothing but my undies.

“Bra.” He nods to the offensive garment. “Off.”

I smile because I just can't help it. “You're kinda bossy.”

He looks up at me and cocks one eyebrow. “I just know what I want. And I want to see you. All of you.”

I take a deep breath. He wouldn't have invited me here and cooked for me if he wasn't really attracted to me. I can do this. I close my eyes and reach behind me and flick off the hooks. The bra falls to my feet. Then I'm stepping out of my panties until I'm just standing in front of him bare as the day I was born.

“Goddamn, Ginger,” he says with that rough voice made of sex and melted chocolate.

But that makes me open my eyes. I try to cover myself, but he grabs my arms and holds them above my head with one hand. His eyes have turned a darker shade and I realize that he is way turned on.

“Your curves are...fuck.” He scrapes his hand over his face, then licks his lips.

His reaction seems good, but I'm a little confused. “Is that a good thing?”

“Yeah, baby, it's a very good thing.” He pulls me forward so I'm standing between his legs and his hands grip my ass. “I love how you look.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he's a chubby chaser, because I know I'm not thin. Thankfully I keep my mouth shut. Because what the hell, Ginger? Then his mouth is on my nipple and my brain is no longer forming coherent thoughts. I grip his shoulders and his skin is so hot. He's moving from one breast to the other and I'm pretty sure I'm dripping wet. I'm so turned on.

He pulls me down so I'm straddled across his lap, and he kisses me. His kisses are so hot I might climax just from his mouth on mine. I'm moaning and writhing on his lap and his hands are in my hair and he's kissing me as if we have all the time in the world.

Then he stands, holding me, turns and drops me on the bed. I bounce once, then lie still, eyeing him, waiting for what comes next. He lies down on top of me and kisses me again, then he moves his mouth down to my neck, nibbles and licks and bites.

Does the same treatment to both breasts for a while, then continues his path downward. It takes me a minute to realize what he's doing and my eyes pop open. I can almost hear tires squealing in my brain.

"No, no, we can just do the regular stuff," I say shoving at his face that's getting lower and lower on my body.

He looks up at me and quirks an eyebrow. "This is regular."

"Yeah, but I don't think I like that."

Now both eyebrows rise. "That either means that no one has ever done it right on you or no one has done it at all. Which is it?"

I bite down on my lip and look away from him, considering how to answer that question.

“So that would mean none at all. What kind of jackasses have you been dating?” He places a kiss right on my inner thigh.

“Just the one.” And then I wince. Why don’t I have a filter that prevents me from admitting stuff like that?

“Dumbass Jeff from college?”

“Right.”

“He never went down on you?” he asks then nibbles on the skin below my belly button. The fleshy part that no amount of crunches or ab workouts have ever slimmed down. *Awesome.*

I shove at his head again. “No, he didn’t.”

“Did you ever go down on him?”

“Well, yeah.”

“But he never reciprocated.”

It’s not a question, but I nod anyways.

“Stupid fucker,” he says with a chuckle and the warm breath skittering over my mound is turning me on even more. “I’m going to really enjoy this.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Have to? No, baby, I want to. I’ve been thinking about this all day.”

Again he presses more kisses to the general area. He hasn’t yet touched between my legs. He’s teasing me, I realize. But this is a whole different kind of teasing, one I definitely like.

“Why do you think I always called you ‘Gingerbread?’” he asks.

I frown. “Because I’m shaped like a loaf of bread?”

He face-plants onto my mound and laughs.

Not exactly how I thought this would go, but I can’t deny it, his humor is making me smile. “What is so funny?”

“You. You’re hilarious.” This his face gets a little more serious. “I called you Gingerbread because you are so sweet. But also because you are good enough to eat.”

And with that all humor disappears because he spreads my legs and licks me from slit to clit.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper. His wet tongue feels so different than anything else. No fingers or vibrators can compare to the slick caress of his tongue against me. I’m going to come in like two point five seconds and I don’t even care. It’s so good. “So good,” I say aloud.

His fingertips dig into my thighs and he moves to the sensitive spot right at the entrance of my pussy. “Oh yeah, Ginger, I knew you’d be delicious,” he murmurs. Then he moves one of his hands to my center and uses one, then two, fingers to penetrate me. Those digits curl upward and find the spot I’ve only ever been able to find with a specially designed G-spot sex toy.

He rubs against that magic place and then sucks my clit into his mouth and I am one hundred percent riding his face at this point. I’ve lost all measure of anxiety and I’m chasing that orgasm as if my very life depends on it.

“Come all over my face, baby,” he tells me. Two swirls of his tongue around my clit and the orgasm bursts through me.

The pleasure radiates from my center through all other parts of my body making it feel like even my brain has the tingles.

Then I'm spent and lying boneless on his bed.

"I think I'm dead."

He chuckles, then places a few lazy kisses across my stomach as he crawls back up my body. "I sure hope not. I have more plans for you."

I crack one eye at him. "I don't think I can do anymore." I spread my legs and arms open. "Take your pleasure, Brock. I am done for."

"You are ridiculous." He kisses one breast. "And adorable." The other breast. "So fucking sexy." He sucks a nipple into his mouth and I arch into him, surprised my body is feeling the stirrings of desire again.

"I've never had multiples," I admit. Then I smack my hand over my face, and whisper between my fingers. "I don't know why I just said that."

"Sounds like a challenge issued, and I accept." He leans over me toward the nightstand drawer and withdraws a box of condoms. An unopened box, I notice. He tears it open, grabs a foil package, then opens that with the aid of his teeth. Then he's rolling it down his dick.

"Um, I hate to be all cliched here and be the fainting virgin, but we have considerable size differences, you and me and that is pretty damn big." I point to his erection.

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. "Are you trying to flatter me?"

"Not really, I'm panicking a little."

“Baby,” his eyes go all tender again. “I’m not going to hurt you. Promise. I’ll go slow and I’ll stop if you tell me to stop.”

I nod and he kisses me and he’s such a good kisser that I don’t even care that he tastes like me. He moves on top of me, slicking his erection through my folds, lubricating himself and building me back up. Then he’s pushing inside me and it doesn’t exactly hurt, but he is definitely bigger than I’ve ever had. When he’s finally all the way in, he looks down at me.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. It’s good. I just feel really full.”

He moans. “You feel amazing.” He looks down at me, our eyes linked and the intimacy nearly steals my breath. “Stay with me, baby. Keep your eyes on me.”

“Okay.”

“I’m gonna move now, but you tell me if it’s too much, yeah?”

I nod.

And he moves and I’m pretty sure the world shifts on its axis. Holy hell. I just thought I’d had sex before. I never questioned Jeff’s equipment, he seemed normal to me, but this, this is next level stuff.

“So damn tight, baby. Your pussy is squeezing me so good. Like you were made just for me.”

Brock is staring into my eyes while he pumps into me and my climax is building at a rapid rate. Oh fuck, I’m going to come again.

He smiles. Evidently I said that last part out loud.

“You come as many times as you need to,” he says. Then he kisses me. He groans into my mouth.

His cock is pressing me in all the right places and his pubic bone is rubbing just right on my clit and then I’m coming. But his kiss swallows my cries.

He’s not done though. He’s still fucking me. His beautiful eyes are locked on mine and it feels like this is something big. Like he could be everything to me. I’m definitely in danger of losing my heart to this man. The man I thought I knew. The one I’d dreaded seeing again.

“You still with me, baby?” he mutters.

“Yeah, I’m here.” I wrap my legs tighter around him and doing that pushes him in the perfect position and the orgasm that rips through me surprises the hell out of me.

“Of fuck, Ginger,” he says. His stomach tightens against me and his breathing increases. “You’re squeezing me so good. YES!” And then he’s coming too, emptying himself into the condom.

chapter **seven**

Brock

I PULL her close to me, her curves molding perfectly to my body. I could definitely get used to this. To her.

“What was your favorite part about being in Europe?” she asks.

I think again about all those postcards I still have. All addressed and stamped, telling her about the architecture and museums, or how the beaches were different. But those are in a box under the bed and I’m not ready to share them with her.

“Being able to see so much of the world in one small area. The countries are small. Not like Texas where it takes you all day to drive from one side to the other. There you can drive from Frankfurt to Venice in the same time it takes to go from Austin to El Paso. That and all the history. There’s history everywhere. Not just in the museums, but on the streets. The actual streets in some cases are still made of stone. I loved all the history.”

“I never would have pegged you for a history nerd,” she says and I can hear the smile in her voice even though she’s facing away from me. “I was surprised when your mom said that’s what you were studying.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t really something I advertised in high school. I got good grades, but never really talked about my interests with the football team or whatever.”

“Or your cheerleader girlfriend,” she adds.

“Definitely not. We never had any important conversations. It didn’t take me long to figure out that we had nothing in common.”

We’re quiet for a while. And it’s a comfortable silence I don’t feel urged to fill with nonsense. My hand rubs up and down on her hip and thigh. Her skin is so soft. As is her hair, which is piled up above our heads like a red tangle of silk.

“I really am sorry about how I treated you in high school. I wish I had an excuse or a reason. I just—”

She puts her hand on mine and squeezes. “We both screwed up. Don’t worry about it. Just be nice to me from now on.”

“I promise.” I kiss her shoulder. I feel compelled to tell her in some way that she’s always been important to me. “Do you remember when my grandpa died?”

“Yeah, we were...what, juniors that year?”

“I think so. We hadn’t talked much or hung out at all that year, but you left that jar of shells on my porch with a note telling me how sorry you were that he died.”

She sucks in a breath. “I’d forgotten about that. I really liked your grandpa. I know I only met him a few times, but he had the best stories.”

“He did. He was great. Left me the money to do all of this even after paying for college.” I’m quiet for a moment and then I tell her. “I still have them. The shells. They’ve moved

with me all over. Every new place I went in Europe, they were with me. *You* were with me.”

She pulls my arm over her, between her breasts and brings my hand to her mouth for a kiss. “That’s very sweet.”

“You’re very sweet.”

chapter **eight**

Brock

I WAKE up and stretch realizing that I slept better last night than I have in a very long time. I'd been attributing my insomnia to long-term jet lag, but now I'm not so sure. It takes me a minute to realize what woke me up though: there's a repetitive knocking coming from somewhere. I sit up and glance at the empty side of the bed next to me. Ginger.

Maybe she left, but then came back because she forgot something. Or went to get us breakfast.

I wrap myself in a towel, and then pad to the door, swinging it open with a smile. "Did you forget something?" But my smile disappears when I see who's standing on the other side. "What are you doing here, Chelsea?"

"Were you even going to call me and let me know you were back in town?" The tall blonde pushes past me and steps into my apartment.

"No, I wasn't really planning on it." She looks exactly the same and I realize she's the equivalent to an empty vase – pretty on the outside, useful for decoration, but not much more.

"I saw who left this morning," she says.

“Were you spying on me?”

She swallows and tilts her chin up. “I came over to welcome you back in town. I didn’t realize you’d have company.” Her arms cross over her chest and she narrows her gaze at me.

Her make-up is flawless and the designer clothes she’s wearing look more in line with Park Avenue than a cozy Texas beach town. I think back to that dress Ginger had one the first night I saw her. Chelsea would never be caught dead wearing something so gaudy or frivolous. It’s just another reason why everything about Ginger calls to me. She’s so authentic, fearless in her ability to be herself.

“I can’t believe you slept with her.”

“I don’t see how that has anything to do with you.” I slip into the bathroom and pull on yesterday’s pair of jeans. “I’ll repeat, why are you here?” I ask her again when I step back out into the open space.

She closes the distance between us. “Now that you’re back, we can pick up where we left off.” Her French manicured fingers walk up my chest. “I’ve missed you.”

I swat her hand away. “There is no ‘we.’ I’m not getting back with you.”

“I can help you with that little gallery of yours. I’m sure Daddy has some contacts to get you a couple of real artists from New York or San Francisco.”

I shake my head because she just doesn’t get it. I fork my fingers through my hair. “I told you when you came to Paris, we are done. We’re *never* getting back together.”

She frowns and I half expect her to stomp her foot. She is not used to be denied anything she wants. Why she still wants

me is a mystery.

“There are plenty of guys in this town that would be happy to be with you, Chelsea. Go pick one of them.”

Her lip curls. “I want my King back.”

It’s kinda sad that she’s still stuck in high school. I honestly don’t even know what to say.

“Seriously, Brock, what is wrong with you? Ginger Starr?”

“Chelsea, be very careful with what you say. You don’t know anything about her. You are half the woman Ginger is.”

She laughs. “Literally. How does it feel to bang someone so squishy?”

God, she’s a bitch. I step closer to look her straight in the face. I don’t want her to miss what I’m about to say. “I don’t want you.” I know it’s harsh, but I’ve tried kindness with her, and it didn’t sink in. I’m not sure this will either. “I want you to leave. There’s no place for you in my life now. And you’re not welcome in my home if you’re going to speak poorly about Ginger.” I make my way to my front door.

Chelsea glares. “I cannot believe you’d pick that short, fat girl over me.”

“I’d pick her again and again over you.” I open the door and wait for my ex-girlfriend to walk away. I can’t help wondering what I ever saw in her. Hormones and stupidity is all I can come up with as I watch her drive away in her shiny new beamer.

I check the kitchen, then go back over to my bed, looking for a note explaining Ginger’s absence, but I can’t find anything so I send her a text.

Me: Missed you this morning. Will I see you later?

Ginger: I'll be downtown most of the day helping with the decorating.

Me: I'll see you there.

Me: Had fun last night.

Ginger: <blushing emoji>

I'm assuming that means she had a good time, too. I know she came several times, which seemed to surprise her. It was hot as hell and I can't wait to do it again.

It should probably make me nervous how much I'm craving her right now. It's not just the sex either. I really enjoy her company. I was such a dick in high school and I'm pissed at myself for the wasted time. We were friends before and now we've reconnected. All that lost time I wasted on Chelsea and the dickheads I was friends with. I haven't contacted any of them since I've been back in Texas. That should tell me something right there.

chapter **nine**

Ginger

I'M up to my elbows untangling lights for the trees on the courthouse square when I hear a familiar voice.

“Hey Ginger,” she says.

I don't bother glancing up because I have nothing to say to her. “Hi Chelsea.” But I keep on with my untangling.

She leans on the railing of the gazebo where I'm set up with my task so I'm not sitting in the direct sunlight. I glance up at her briefly. She looks like she always does. Polished and perfect from head to toe. She's tall and thin with shiny blonde hair—straight, of course—and crystal blue eyes. She's a classic beauty, though I know from experience that it's only skin deep with her.

“What do you need?” I ask her.

She chuckles. “I don't need anything. Evidently you need a reminder of who Brock belongs to.”

My heart stutters and my stomach clenches. “I beg your pardon?”

“Brock. I just left his place. He texted me after you left this morning and we just got back together.” She pushes her glossy

hair behind her shoulder. “I know you were with him last night.” Another breathy chuckle. “He was trying to prove a point to me. Trying to make me jealous. I just left his place about an hour ago. Don’t you love all the exposed bricks in his apartment. It’s just so European.”

This brings me to my feet. She’s been in his apartment. She’s not lying about that. My heart is pounding, echoing in my ears with a whoosh-whoosh sound. “And you and him are back together?”

She frowns then gives me a patronizing grin. “You didn’t think he’d really pick you, did you?” Her manicured hand settles on her chest to finger the diamond pendant. “Oh, you did. I’m so sorry.” She pats my hand with mock compassion, and I want to claw her eyes out.

My stomach is churning and I kinda want to throw up. I force a laugh out and I’m pleased it doesn’t sound fake. “Last night meant nothing to me. It was just sex.” I’m surprised I can even say those words because last night was so much more. “So if you want Brock, you can have him.” I drop the tangle of lights and pick up the clipboard my mom handed me earlier. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a list longer than my arm to tackle to make sure tonight’s lighting goes off without a hitch.” Then I walk away, holding my breath to keep my tears at bay. I barely make it into the bathroom at the bakery across the street before the tears burst through.

I should have known. I’m such a fool, thinking Brock would actually pick me. He could have any woman in this town. Even if Chelsea wasn’t in play.

I grab my phone.

Me: Just saw Chelsea, she said she's back with Brock.

Annie: She's a damn liar and a skank.

Me: You don't know any of that. She knew what his apartment looks like, Annie. I knew this was too good to be true. Glad I found out before my heart was involved.

But the rate that my tears are falling tells me that my heart is more involved than I would like. Damn, damn, damn.

chapter ten

Brock

I'VE SEEN glimpses of Ginger since I arrived at the town square, but every time I try to reach her, she disappears. I'm not sure what's going on. When I finally make my way over to her, she won't look at me. Instead she keeps her focus on the task of weaving lights through a small sage bush.

"Hey." I lean over to kiss her and she shifts so that I end up colliding with her cheek.

"Hi." Her voice is clipped and cold.

"Do you need any help?"

She glances at me briefly and there's no warmth in her gaze.

What the hell is happening?

"I've got things under control here, but they probably could use help stringing the lights in the trees. I don't do ladders so I'm working the shrubs."

"Sure. Hey, are we okay?"

"Why wouldn't we be?"

"I don't know."

She nods toward the trees. “You can ask my dad over there what needs to be done. My mom isn’t letting him climb any ladders today.”

“Yeah, I’ll go do that.” I walk off and I’m confused as hell. I’ve got a knot in my stomach and my hands are sweating despite the pleasant breeze blowing today. We had an amazing time last night. We texted earlier in the day and she seemed fine. But now, something is definitely off. I go find her dad as she suggested and get to work on one of the trees. But an hour later when I see Ginger’s friend Annie walking around, I climb down and jog over to her.

“Hey, Annie.”

She looks up and grins. “Hey Brock. Welcome back.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I rub at the back of my neck. “Did Ginger talk to you about anything? About me?”

She frowns for a moment then tilts her head. “Did she ask you about Chelsea?”

“Chelsea? What the hell does she have to do with anything?”

“Chelsea came and told Ginger that the two of you were back together. She made it clear she’d been at your place this morning. Said you were using Ginger to make Chelsea jealous.”

“Oh for fucks sake.”

“I told Ginger to ask you about it before she believed it, because Chelsea is a liar, but I’m guessing that didn’t happen.”

I shake my head. “No. She just dismissed me.”

Annie blows out a breath. “Okay, what you need to know about Ginger is that her college boyfriend really screwed her

over. Not only did he string her along—while screwing around on her—but when he finally broke things off he told her that she'd never be anyone's first choice. She'd always be the rebound girl or an alternate, never the first pick."

"What a dick!"

"Right. But that kind of stuff gets into your head. Even someone as centered as Ginger. Something about his words rang true for her, and I think Chelsea managed to hit on that."

"But she is my choice. Even without Ginger, I wouldn't want Chelsea again. But Ginger..." I wipe my hands down my face. "She's amazing. I want a shot with her."

"Then make her believe that."

My heart speeds. Yeah, that's what I need to do. I need to convince her. "How do I do that?"

"Figure out a way to let her know that you pick her. That she's the one you want," Annie says. Then she pats my shoulder. "Good luck. I'm rooting for you."

"Heh...yeah, thanks." Now I just need to find the perfect way to tell Ginger she belongs with me.

chapter eleven

Ginger

SOMETIME AROUND FIVE that afternoon I managed to stop crying long enough to get the redness out of my eyes and reapply some light make-up. Waterproof mascara this time. Just in case. I'm wearing my favorite jeans and Christmas t-shirt and I'm determined to enjoy tonight. Or at least survive until I can get back to my tiny apartment and be alone.

Pretty much the entire town of Sand Dollar has shown up for tonight's festivities and we're all gathered on the town square. A million twinkle lights surround us and it's hard not to feel a little holiday spirit. We're standing in front of the gazebo waiting for the mayor to give a speech and then my mom is going to say some words about the fundraising and the silent auction going on.

Suddenly, the lights go black and there's a collective groan in the crowd. I glance around trying to locate my mom, but I can't really see much of anything. Annie is standing next to me and she grabs my elbow.

"I'm sure it's just a glitch," she says.

Then I hear the beginning sounds of the most annoying Christmas song ever. The bells and then Mariah Carey's voice

declaring she doesn't want a lot for Christmas. A spotlight hits the center of the gazebo which is used as a stage for events like this. Someone slides out onto the stage wearing a Santa costume.

I know that's not our mayor because this Santa is thin and fit. "What is going on?"

"Something special," Annie says.

The spotlight zooms in and I realize that's Brock up there. It's not a full-blown Santa suit, or at least it's the suit, only minus the beard and fat belly and he's lip synching "All I Want For Christmas."

"What is he doing?"

"I believe he figured out how to make his choice known."

I glance over at Annie, because her words don't make any sense. But she's pushing me forward until I'm at the front of the crowd, standing right in front of the steps to the gazebo.

Brock continues to lip synch and dance around, the spotlight following him. And his eyes never leave my face. Then his voice rings out, singing along about how he wants me for his own. How I'm the only thing he wants for Christmas.

He's pointing at me while wiggling his hips. Then he jumps down from the gazebo and pulls me in his arms. The spotlight follows him and now shines down on us.

"Ginger Starr, I'm falling fast and hard for you and I want a real shot. I want us to be together."

My breath stops. Or maybe that was my heart. I hope I'm not blacking out at a time like this. I search his face and find only sincerity in his gaze. "What about Chelsea?"

“What about her?” He cups my face, looks into my eyes. “Do you really think I would have made love to you last night if it meant nothing to me? Did it feel like nothing to you?”

I shake my head. Tears are gathering in my eyes and I hate the fact that all of my emotions are processed through my damn tear ducts. “It felt like way more than nothing.” *It felt like everything.*

“Exactly. Will you be mine?”

I give him a watery laugh. “I think that’s a Valentine’s thing.”

“Well, now it’s a Christmas thing. Or just an everyday thing.” And just like that, all the lights come back on and the whole town is lit up like a perfect Christmas village. Well minus the cold weather and snow.

“Yeah,” I laugh. “I’ll be yours. I think I might already love you. Is that crazy?” I bite down on my lip, nervous at my admission.

“No, it’s not crazy because I’m pretty sure I already love you, too.”

And then he kisses me and the town around us cheers.

epilogue

Ginger

ONE YEAR LATER...

“Wake up, sleepy head.”

Brock’s voice filters into my dreams and I smile.

“I’m not ready to wake up. I was having an incredibly sexy dream about you.”

He kisses my eyelids, then my nose, then each cheek. “Wake up and we can act it out.”

I crack open one eye and I can’t help the wide grin I give him. “Why are you insisting I get up so early?”

He reaches for my hands and pulls me to my feet. “I want to show you something.”

I follow behind him as he leads me down the staircase to our living room. We moved in together six months ago, into the most adorable bungalow. He repurposed the apartment over his gallery to house the visiting artists and everything he’s done has been so great for the town. And I’ve never been happier. The lights are out, but the Christmas tree in front of

the big picture window is all illuminated. My heart swells and I squeeze his hand.

“I love you,” I tell him.

He turns around to wink at me. “I know you do.”

I roll my eyes. I think back to that night, a year ago, when he first told me he loved me. After we left the town lighting and went back to his place. He’d sat me in the middle of his bed and pulled out a box from underneath. I’d opened it to find five years’ worth of postcards he’d written me and never sent. I smile at the memory and squeeze his hand.

“Come sit.” He drags me over to the rug in front of the seven-foot fir tree. “Tonight starts your parents’ parties.”

“I know. I can’t believe they’re doing another twelve days thing. You’d think all the drama from last year would have changed that.”

“Well the fundraiser was a huge success.” He gets down on the floor with me, and reaching into the tree he pulls out a gift bag. “I have something special I want you to wear tonight.”

A frown weighs down my brow. He never makes comments about my clothing other than to tell me when he thinks I look beautiful. “Do you know what the theme is? My mom wouldn’t tell me.”

“Something about Christmas lights or sparkles or something,” he says, then he nods to the gift bag in my lap. “Open it.”

“If this is some skimpy lingerie, I’m not wearing it to my parents’ house.” But my hand doesn’t feel anything silky or soft. Instead, it grabs onto a small velvet box. My heart stops. Yep, I think I might need mouth to mouth to be resuscitated. Still, I pull it out and find an iconic blue box. “Oh my God,

Brock.” I look up at him, and I know I’ve got damned tears in my eyes because I can’t do anything without crying.

But he’s kneeling in front of me and has the biggest grin on his face. “Ginger, I love you so damn much I can’t even believe it. I never thought I’d be this happy. But every day you surprise me and make me laugh and turn me on. I should have known when we were kids that we were meant to be, but I was just stupid and I’m so thankful you gave me another shot at getting us right. You’re the love of my life, and you’ll make my Christmas and pretty much my entire life if you’ll be my wife.”

The box is still sitting—unopened—in my palm, but I tackle him to the ground and kiss all over his face. “YES!”

He laughs, picks up the box where I’ve dropped it and opens it for me. “Don’t you want to see your ring?”

It’s simple and delicate and perfect. A round bezel-set single solitaire diamond in a plain platinum band. It’s exactly what I would have picked out myself.

He slides the ring onto my finger, and it fits perfectly.

I cup his face and kiss him. “I love you, Brock Daniels.”

“And I love you Ginger soon-to-be Daniels.”

“I never said I was taking your name.”

He rolls his eyes. “Do you have to be a pain in the ass about everything?”

“Probably.”

With that he picks me up in a fireman hold and carries me back up to our bed.

mistletoe surprise



ONE HOT FORMER MARINE...

The minute I see Annie Fitzpatrick, I want her. Against me, under me, all around me. She is as full of humor and joy as she was when we knew each other in high school. The problem is she's my sister's best friend. Everyone in my family—everyone in the whole town for that matter—loves her. I'm not sure I have anything to give except my desire and

if I break her heart, no one will ever forgive me. I sure as hell won't be able to forgive myself.

...plus one curvy girl next door

I've had a crush on Kris Starr since we were in high school. Now he's home for good and I'm ready for him to see me as more than his kid sister's annoying side kick. One night, I take my chances and kiss him. Next thing I know he's in my bed. As hot as we are together, I know this is just for one night.

...equal two little pink lines ...

Neither of us expected our night of passion to result in a baby bump for the holidays. Can I convince this emotionally wounded man that he's the one I want, scars and all?

chapter **twelve**

Annie

UNREQUITED LOVE SUCKS.

Or maybe it's just unrequited lust. I don't know. All I know is that I have crushed on the same guy since high school and the object of my affection is back in town—for good. And I'll be seeing him tonight.

How can I have lust for someone I haven't seen in person in more than a year? Yeah, I don't really get it either other than the fact that he's beautiful.

A wave of guilt sweeps through me as I eye my best friend. Why guilt? Because Ginger is my ride or die. I know all her secrets. I tell her everything. But I haven't told her this.

This crush, this obsession, is the one thing I've kept from her in our years of friendship.

That is, until I spilled the beans last night in a burst of drunken over-sharing.

“So when are you going to tell me more about this mystery guy you're all hot for?” she asks. Ginger Starr and I have been best friends forever. I don't even know when precisely. I just

know at some point in elementary school we latched on to each other and that was it. She was my person.

Which is why I've hated keeping a secret from her. Just for the last few years. Okay like four years, but still. I didn't want her to feel awkward. And at the end of the day, it doesn't even matter. Nothing will ever come of my obsession.

"There's nothing to tell," I say, absently. We're at my house preparing some extra dishes for the big Thanksgiving gathering that's happening at her parent's house later today. Since I have a double-oven and Ginger doesn't, we're here. "It's just a crush."

Why did I ever tell her about this anyways?

"You would never have even told me about him anyways had it not been for that extra drink the other night." She gives me that look. She's a tiny thing, except for her crazy Merida red-hair. And that's saying something because I am not tall. Most people think I'm the short one. But at least I'm over five feet. Ginger, not so much.

"Why don't you just tell me about you and Brock?" I say.

She stirs the sweet potato mixture she's working on and smirks at me. "Nice try. Brock and I are fine and you know all about us. I'm talking about you."

I exhale slowly. "Listen, there's nothing to tell. It's a non-starter. Yes, I am exceptionally attracted to him. And have been for a really long time. But he does not see me that way. So it doesn't matter."

Her big eyes widen even more. "Oh sweetie, I don't believe that for a moment! Any man would be lucky to see you, to have you. You're amazing. And last year I would have said the exact same things about Brock."

“You hated Brock last year.”

She waves her hand. “Hate is such a strong word.”

I roll my eyes. “A word you used about him.”

She waves a hand dismissively. The determined gleam in her gaze tells me she’s not going to drop this. “Here’s what I think you should do. The next time you see this guy, I think you should go for it. Tell him you want him. Kiss him. Ask him out. Whatever. Just don’t wait silently. What if he’s waiting for you to make the first move?”

I snort. “That is doubtful.”

I’m saved from saying anything else because my doorbell rings.

I nearly laugh when I open the door, because it’s like he heard us talking about him. There he is, the object of my unrequited lust.

Kris Starr. The hottest guy I’ve ever met in person. The guy I’ve wanted since high school.

I haven’t seen him in over a year. He’s still tall and impossibly broad, just a massive slab of masculine muscles. Gah, my heart is pounding and he hasn’t even spoken. I don’t know how it’s possible. I really don’t. But somehow he’s even hotter than he was last time I saw him.

It must be the heavy scowl he’s wearing like a shield. It’s a non-verbal ‘fuck-off’ and for whatever insane reason it is working for me. Big time. I suppress a shudder and meet his gaze.

It’s a dangerous place to look. Almost as dangerous as his full mouth and chiseled jaw that make me want to attack him

with kisses. But I hold my ground and repress my urges to act like a horny stalker and just stare into his blue-green eyes.

“Hey Annie, is my sister here?”

Right. His sister. Because the object of my lust is my best friend’s older brother.

“She’s right this way.”

Fuck my life.

chapter **thirteen**

Kris

FOR THE FIRST time in years I'm home for Thanksgiving. The last seven I've spent in a chow hall eating mass produced turkey dinners. A few of those I got to video chat with my family. But this year, I'm home.

This year and every year that will follow, because I'm done. No longer on active duty. No longer fit for duty is what the truth is. Because I have PTSD, that comes with panic attacks that seem to occur in the least opportune moments.

I'd say I've been there, done that, and got the t-shirt, but mostly I just have the scars.

Some of them on the outside. Most not.

None of the scars help me fit in now that I'm back in civilian life. Nevertheless, my mother sent me to my sister's best friend's house on an errand. Ostensibly because they're using her ovens, but I know it's because my mom thinks I should 'Get out more.'

When Annie answers the door, I blurt, "My mom sent me with these pies."

She leans in to hug me because yeah, we do that. I hold the containers with the pies out with one hand while I wrap my other arm around her. The last time I hugged her, she'd been younger. Too young.

I'd latched that notion to force myself not to notice her soft curves. Today, I'm unprepared and can't do that as her full breasts press against my chest and I suppress a groan. I inhale the sweet and spicy scent of her, like the tea she always drinks, I suddenly remember.

Annie has been Ginger's best friend since they were kids. I've known her since she was a kid. But she looks decidedly un-kid like at the moment. Those jeans are hugging her ass and, shit, I really need to get laid. I cannot fantasize about my sister's best friend.

She's not just my sister's best friend. She's practically part of the family. Everyone in my family adores her. I'll get voted off the island if I so much as touch her.

But seriously, when did Annie get all curvy and delicious?

Her black hair is pulled into a high ponytail that just leaves her neck exposed and all I can see is this expanse of golden skin. I follow her into the kitchen where I find my sister standing behind a big island.

I do my best to focus on the pies and my sister and not the other woman. The one who's turned to face me to grab a pie out of my hand. She's got a t-shirt on with a picture of a camera and it says, "I'm about to snap!" It's grey and frankly not even that cute of a shirt, but the way the words are hugging her tits is making my mouth dry.

Yep, it's definitely been a while since I've gotten laid. A really long time, actually.

Annie eyes me funny, cocking one eyebrow. “You alright there, Kris?”

I frown. Because no, I am not alright. It is not okay to lust after your sister’s friend. Especially one you haven’t seen in years.

“What’s with the shirt?” I ask and my voice comes out more terse than I meant it to.

“Annie’s a photographer and graphic designer. She takes the most amazing pictures.”

“Like landscapes or wildlife or something?” I ask.

Ginger laughs.

“Not exactly. I take pictures of people—men mostly—and then I design book covers.”

Jealousy surges through me and I fight to tamp it down. I have no right to feel jealous of any one Annie spends time with. She doesn’t belong to me.

Yet there’s a tiny voice inside whispering that maybe she does. Maybe she *should*. “Book covers of men? What does that even mean?” I ask.

“Show him your office,” Ginger says.

I set down the other pie and turn to Annie.

“I’m sure he has better things to do,” Annie says.

“No, I’d like to see.”

Annie nods and turns and I try not to stare at the round plumpness of her ass, but I do it anyways. Because it’s plump and round and fucking perfect. I bet if I pressed her body against me and kissed her, that ass would fit perfectly in my palms.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

She leads me into her home office and it's a disaster. There's stuff everywhere on her desk and a long table across the room. Papers and pictures litter the area, but the walls are covered in framed images of book covers. Mostly men in various state of undress, six-pack abs, brooding glares.

"Romance novels?" I ask.

"It's a huge market," she says, her tone slightly agitated.

I hold up my hands. "I've read a couple myself."

"I'm sorry, what now?"

I shrug. "It's always surprising to people, but lots of guys in the service read them. We read what we can get our hands on over there. Romance novels are everywhere. And their readers are generous people who ship boxes of them to bases."

She smiles broadly and I'm struck by how damn pretty she is. Was she always this pretty? She looks mostly like her Chinese mother, her face round, her skin creamy and fair and those almond-shaped eyes. And she's got this perfect bow-shaped mouth which really just translates into the most kissable lips I've ever seen.

"What did you think of them? The ones you read?"

I wince. "They were okay. A little off-putting by how perfect the guys are though. Billionaires and rock stars. I guess that's the fantasy though, right?"

She chuckles. "I guess. So that's kinda how I got into this. I loved the books. Before I branched out, I was taking pictures mostly of pregnant women and engagement shots," she rolls her eyes, "lots of annoying baby destroys the cake on their first birthday sessions. Those were a bitch to clean up. In any

case I was a big reader and it just sorta happened. Now I work with guys, a lot like you.” She looks over at me and my skin heats as her gaze travels my body. Her cheeks pinken and she looks away.

“Guys like me?”

“Not professional models per se, just regular guys who happen to be ridiculously hot and I take their pictures. I don’t always design the covers myself, sometimes other designers just buy the images from me.”

“Hold up,” I take a step closer to her. “Did you just suggest that I could be on a book cover?”

She releases a nervous laugh and kinda backs out of the room. “I’m not going to boost your ego, Kris. You know what I meant. I’ve got to get back to the cooking.”

Watching her scurry back to the kitchen, I find myself smiling. For the first time in weeks, maybe months, a genuine grin pulls at my lips. Annie is so damn pretty. So damn sweet. So damn *good*.

Just like that, my smile is gone. Because, yes, she is pretty and sweet and good.

And there’s no room for any of that in my life. No, that’s not right, there’s no room for someone like me in her life. Someone broken and scarred. I don’t know if there ever will be. If I’ll ever feel whole again. If I’ll ever be able to do right by a woman like Annie.

chapter **fourteen**

Annie

TODAY HAS BEEN WEIRD. I mean it's Thanksgiving. All family-oriented holidays come with a certain amount of weirdness. Toss into the mix that my parents—I'm an only child—are currently on a six-week Mediterranean cruise. So I was perfectly content to do my own thing at home.

Eat too many bags of microwave popcorn while binge-watching Star Trek and snuggling with my cat, Winnie. But Ginger would have none of that. Also Ginger's mom. They're my surrogate family, so here I am, an honorary Starr family member during the holiday that is all about food.

Here's the thing, I love food. Like seriously love to eat. And yeah, my adoration of carbs and sugary treats has given me some significant junk in my trunk, but I'm okay with that. I look like I enjoy my life and I do, and I'm okay with that.

But it's hard to really dive into the food when someone's eyes are on you constantly. Okay, I haven't actually seen him looking at me, but I can still feel his gaze nonetheless. It's weird. And disconcerting. My skin feels hot and prickly like every sensation is just a little too much.

Is he just amazed that I can eat like one of those giant-mouthed whales that swims through the ocean, mouth opened and scooping up all the edible goodness? Wait, are those whales or sharks? Focus, Annie.

Is that what I look like? I'm not one to be self-conscious. If a man can't deal with the fact that I like food, then he can fuck off. I'm never gonna be one of those women who only eats lettuce and a single bite of pie.

Seriously, a single bite of pie? What is that?

But I digress. The point is, I'm feeling watched. Kris isn't directly across from me, that is Holly's—the eldest Starr child—husband, Mike. He's a talker, that Mike. Always chatting about something and frankly I'm not sure anyone has a clue what the hell he's even saying.

The meal is mostly done and people are just sorta picking at the remnants on their plate while we do that thing everyone does on this holiday...wait to see if anyone is going to be brave enough to cut the first pie right after the big meal. Maybe I'll just take some pie to go. Go home and put on stretchy pants and a big sweatshirt sans bra.

I glance up and this time I do catch Kris looking at me. His blue-green eyes are so damn pretty. And he's got that square jaw with the cleft in his chin and the stubble from his morning shave. He's been out of the military long enough that his hair has started to grow out and it's a little shaggy. He's looking right at me so I just smile, then turn away trying to figure out how to make a quick exit.

Ginger and Brock are exchanging whispers and heated glances and I wonder how long it will be before they leave to go and get naked together. I'm so damn happy for her. For them. Seeing them fall in love has been like watching a

romance novel. Still, I can't help the pangs that come from being around them. Being their third wheel. I want what they have. I want a forever; my own family.

Finally, Holly stands to go and check on the baby and the rest of the table disperses. Once people have left this room, it'll be easier for me to make a getaway. It's not that I don't love the Starr family, I truly do. They've always loved me like I was one of their own. But being around Kris is distracting.

Eventually I'm able to say my goodbyes and head out to my car. But as I'm crossing the yard to the driveway I see a figure standing in the darkness looking up at the stars. It's Kris. I can tell from the broad expanse of his shoulders, the tightness in his form. I walk over and put my hand on his arm and he startles slightly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

He nods, then goes back to looking at the stars. "They look different here than they did over there."

I glance up. It's one of those fall nights in Texas that's kinda cool and there's not a cloud in the sky. The stars are bright and plentiful.

"Do you miss it?"

"Yes. But only in that I don't know how to do anything else. I've been a marine my entire adult life. In every other way, I'm glad I'm home."

"So, why did you sneak out of there so quickly?" I ask.

One meaty shoulder lifts in a shrug. "They'll start planning all the Christmas shenanigans in detail tonight. I just needed a break."

“You’ve managed to hide your true Grinch nature before,” I tease, nudging him with my elbow.

He chuckles and the deep timbre of his laugh washes over me. Somehow the sound is both soothing and intimate. It feels special. Like something just for me. “You always could read me better than anyone.”

I shrug. “We were the odd men out. You, the Christmas hater in a family of Santa’s elves. And me, the token Jew.”

“I don’t hate Christmas.”

I turn and face him, my expression softening. “I know that. Just the rest of your family is a little over the top about it.”

He snorts, glances down at me and his smile hits me right in my heart.

Being this close to him is dangerous.

“A little?” he asks. “I saw pictures of that dress mom made Ginger wear last year.”

“The one with all the gift bows? Yeah, it was pretty terrible. But it caught Brock’s attention so it all worked out.”

Then suddenly I’m hearing Ginger’s words from earlier today.

Tell him you want him. Kiss him. Ask him out. Whatever. Just don’t wait silently.

But I can’t do it. Right here on the Starr family front lawn. Can I?

“Um, so hey, I meant what I said earlier. If you’re interested in possibly making it onto some book covers I’d love to take your picture. You’d get paid. Not a ton, but it builds up after a while.”

“I think you’re just trying to get me to take off my shirt.”

Is he flirting with me? You know what, even if he isn’t, I’m going to go for it. I turn my body to face him, put my hands on his chest.

He looks down at me, a slight frown on his brow.

“I’ve got to do this just one time or I’ll regret it forever.” I say, then I lean up on my tiptoes and kiss him.

Initially he tenses and I think he’s going to shove me away. So I don’t kiss him long, I don’t really want to give him the chance to reject me.

I end the kiss and turn towards my car. “Goodnight, Kris. Happy Thanksgiving.”

I’m all the way to my car when he’s on me, his hands roughly turning me to face him. Then his mouth crashes onto mine. His tongue sweeps across my bottom lip and I open, sliding mine against his as we meet in the middle. His kiss isn’t like mine, tentative and sweet. No, his is like a claiming.

Big, warm and slightly calloused hands cradle my face as he devours me. It is the single hottest kiss of my life. Messy, erratic and just wild. He ends the kiss, making little nips at the corners of my mouth. His forehead presses to mine.

“Why did you kiss me?” he asks, his deep voice is rough..

“Because I’ve always wanted to.”

He leans up and stares into my eyes. Good grief I could literally get lost in those turquoise pools of his. “Always?”

I chuckle and I don’t even care that it sounds awkward. “I’ve had a crush on you a long time.” Crush doesn’t even really begin to cover it, but I’ll leave it at that. “Why did you kiss me?”

“Because you made me feel something and I haven’t felt anything in a very long time.”

I can feel the evidence of his arousal pressed against my hip. It might just be a fluke, but right now he wants me. I bite down on my lip, then jump over the rest of the cliff. “Want to come home with me?”

“Very badly. You sure?”

Am I sure I want this hot, amazing guy? Um... yes, please! “Definitely.” Except I see the flicker of doubt in his gaze. “Are you sure?”

“That I want you? Yes.” He traces a single finger down my cheek. “But you’re my sister’s best friend. I don’t want this to be awkward. I’ve been discharged, so I’m here to stay, but I’m not ready for—”

I take a step back, holding up a hand to cut him off. “Let me stop you right there. I’m not proposing marriage. All I want is a single night of hot sex.”

chapter **fifteen**

Kris

I AGREE to follow Annie to her house so I have my truck with me. It should save us any awkward leaving scenarios where she has to bring me back to my place. But this lag of time is tricky. We're not in the same vehicle and therefore we're not touching or kissing.

There's plenty of time to change our minds. Well, there's time for her to change her mind. I want her. Now.

Even with my AC blaring in my face, I'm still so hot all over, my skin is tingling. My dick is still hard in my jeans so I'm very thankful that it doesn't take us long to get into Annie's neighborhood. I park my truck on the street in front of her house.

She gets out of her car and heads to her front door. She turns and watches me cross her yard.

"You still want me to—"

She grabs me by the shirt and pulls me to her for a heated kiss. Goddamn this woman. Her kisses are like an explosion in my body. Like a grenade of lust that ricochets through every nerve ending. I don't think I've ever wanted anyone like I want her.

She breaks the kiss. “My panties are so wet it’s ridiculous.” Then she turns and uses the key to unlock her door.

Just the thought of her soaked panties has me crowding her and as soon as we have the door closed, I’m on my knees in front of her. I unbutton her jeans and shove them down her round hips.

“Oh wow,” she says.

I pull her legs wider apart, then bunch her shirt up so I can see her soft stomach and her plain cotton pink panties. There’s a wet mark right in the front and I growl at the sight.

“Goddamn, Annie, that’s so fucking hot.” I lean forward and run my nose up the crease of her leg. Close enough I can scent her arousal and I swear to Christ my stomach actually growls. I pull her panties to the side and see a landing strip of black curls at the top of her mound. I swipe my thumb through her folds and she’s so slick. I bend her over my shoulder and stand. “Bedroom?”

“Down the hall to the right. I can walk.”

“This is faster.” I palm her plump ass and squeeze it as I walk. Once we reach her bedroom I put her down, then pull her too me for another intense kiss. Our tongues slide against one another’s and it’s the sexiest kiss I’ve ever had. This woman.

I break the kiss and pull off my shirt, then start on my jeans. I glance up and she’s just staring at me. I look down. “What’s the matter?”

She smiles. “Not a damn thing, you’re just so perfect. You’re like a real-life version of a GI-Joe doll.”

I try not to laugh because frankly that's kind of insulting, but it's still funny. "Marines do not like to be called GI Joes."

She gives me a fake frown. "Yes, sir."

I drop my jeans and my boxers too and I'm standing in front of her naked except for my ink. My cock is so hard and pointing right at her.

Her eyes are locked on my dick and she licks her lips.

"Before I fuck you, I want to eat you."

Her gaze flies up to mine. "If you're expecting me to argue..." she kinda shrugs and just grins.

Excellent.

"Get naked." I lay back on her bed and watch her remove the rest of her clothes. Her shirt comes off and drops to the floor and she's left in a no-nonsense bra which she effortlessly unhooks, then lets it fall off her shoulders. Her tits are fantastic. Big and round with pale pink nipples that look as hard as diamonds from where I'm laying. I point to her jeans which are still wrapped around her hips. "The rest."

She shimmies out of the jeans, then peels off those wet pink panties that I just might have to steal and bring home with me. I don't stop to wonder why I have that urge.

"Come'er."

She frowns a little in clear confusion.

I pat my chest. "Come sit on my face."

Her mouth falls open.

I just grin. "If you don't like the position, we'll change it, but I want you to ride my face."

She bites down on her lip and climbs up onto the bed, then slides her body up mine. She makes a slight detour to lick straight up my cock and I groan while my eyes roll to the back of my head.

“Fuck.”

Then she moves all the way up, placing her thighs on either side of my ears and that perfect pussy is right where I want it. I wrap my arms around her thighs and cup her hips as she slowly lowers herself down.

I swipe my tongue through her wet seam and her flavor bursts on my tongue. “You’re fucking delicious. Put your hands on the wall or anywhere on me. I’m going to make you come so hard.”

“The dirty talking is really working for me.” Her voice is husky.

I chuckle, but then get to work. I squeeze her ass and then slide my tongue into her hot, soaked channel. I fuck her with my tongue for a while and then she’s relaxed enough that she’s rocking on my face.

“Oh my God, Kris. Fuck, fuck, fuck.” She releases another string of more or less incoherent words as she rocks against my mouth. I swirl my tongue around her clit, once, twice, then I suck it into my mouth.

“Coming!” she yells and then the waves of her orgasm shuttle through her and end with a fresh gush of liquid.

Once her climax subsides, she slides down my body so that she’s now sprawled across my chest. Her hot, wet pussy is nestled right up against my cock and I groan at the contact.

“Condom?” I ask. “If you don’t have any, I’ve got one in my wallet.”

She leans up and faces me and smiles. She's so fucking beautiful in that moment, my heart tightens and I wonder what it would have been like for her to have been mine while I was over in that damn desert. My family wrote me and sent me packages, but I didn't have a girl waiting for me back home. But Annie's been here. And she said she's wanted me for a long time.

She reaches across the bed to the nightstand and opens the drawer and rifles around before triumphantly producing a foil pack. She tears it open with her teeth, then rolls it down my length. It's one of the sexiest things I've ever seen.

"Why didn't you ever tell me you wanted me?" I ask her. It's probably stupid timing, but I still want to know.

Her mouth opens, then she bites down on that lip. Her almond-shaped eyes are hooded from her recent release and her skin is rosy.

"You're so beautiful." I grip her hips and shift her body so she rubs against my covered dick. She's so wet that I'm nice and lubed after two swipes.

She moves to get off of me and I still grab her hip.

"No, on top. I want to watch you ride me. I want to see these fantastic tits," I cup them both, then tweak her nipples, "bounce while we fuck."

"Seriously that mouth of yours is filthy."

It's funny that she's brought that up twice now because I don't recall ever being so damned chatty in the bedroom before. But with Annie, I want to talk to her. I want to tell her how perfect her body is, how beautiful she is to me. I want to watch her eyes grow dark with desire when I say wicked things.

She goes up on her knees and reaches behind her to notch my cock at her entrance. Then she slowly lowers herself until I'm fully seated.

“Whoa! You're kinda big.”

“Kinda? I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not.”

She laughs. “It's a compliment. You've stretched me in the best way.”

My hands are still on her tits and I lean myself up so I can suck one pale pink peak into my mouth. That's when she starts to move and holy fuck. This woman is going to destroy me. In the best possible way.

“I want to take your picture,” she breaths.

“Right now?”

She laughs and her pussy squeezes my dick. “No, I just meant in general. I could put you on a thousand book covers. Your face, your body. Those Caribbean sea eyes of yours.” She cups my cheek. “You're a hero, you might as well pose as one on book covers.”

I can't respond to that because I'm no fucking hero. So I kiss her while she rides me. Our tongues duel and there's sucking and biting and I wonder how I've lived this long without kisses like this. Her kisses.

But this was supposed to just be a one-night thing. I'm just not sure one night is going to be enough.

“You're hitting all my spots.”

“That good?”

“Oh yeah. So damn good.”

“I want you to come on my cock. I wanna feel your pussy squeezing me.”

“I don’t know if I can. I don’t normally...” then her eyes widen. “Holy fuck!” She tosses her head back and her body detonates.

Her pussy clenches and tightens and I can’t hold back any more. I come with a roar. It’s so intense I’m surprised I didn’t blow a hole through the condom.

It’s not until later, when she is asleep in my arms, her lush body curled against mine, that panic hits me. Not the crippling, heart-pounding panic of an anxiety attack. This is just a slow, steady pressure pressing against my chest.

I don’t want to let her go. I don’t want this to end, even though it has to. I have nothing to offer a woman like Annie.

She’s smart and funny. She’s got her own successful career. The last thing she needs is someone like me fucking up her life. And I have no doubt that ‘fucking up her life’ is what I would do if I tried to stick around. I don’t even have a job yet.

Annie wanted a single night of hot sex. I want much more.

chapter **sixteen**

Annie

FOUR WEEKS *later*

I stare at the white stick in my hand, my heart pounding so fast I think I might be hyperventilating. How did this happen? I mean I obviously know how it happened, I was there. But we used a condom.

Condom or not, that is, most definitely, two pink lines. I glance back at the packaging and yep, two means pregnant.

Pregnant.

“Holy shit!” I yell to no one in my bathroom.

“Knock, knock,” Ginger’s voice comes from the hallway.

I don’t have time to react or hide anything because the door is open and I’m sitting on the closed toilet holding a pregnancy test—a positive pregnancy test—when my best friend finds me.

“Watcha doing?” Then her brown eyes drop to my hand and they widen. “Ohmygod! Is that what I think it is?” She leans over to peer at the little window. “Oh wow. Okay, we’ve

got this. You're okay." She takes the test out of my hand and sets it on the counter, then she sits on the edge of the tub next to me and rubs my back.

"The back rubbing is nice," I murmur. I lean forward, bracing my elbows on my knees, and put my face in my hands.

"I know you're still processing this because it's obviously life altering, but do you want to talk about it?"

I lift a shoulder in a shrug. "Nothing really to discuss."

"Sure, sure, but what about the father? I mean I'm assuming its the mystery hookup? The one you said broke your vagina."

"In the best of ways," I sigh. "Oh God, I'm never going to have sex again."

"Well, that's just silly. Parents have sex all the time. Please don't make me tell you the story from last year that ended up with me knowing too much about my parent's sex life because of an ill-timed erectile-dysfunction pill."

I laugh in spite of my current situation.

"When are you going to tell the father?" Ginger asks.

Shit. "Soon. He needs to know because I'm keeping the baby." I sit up straight and my hand goes to my stomach. It's not flat because I've always been on the rounder side of things.

"I'm sure he'll want to be involved."

"Maybe. I don't know." The single night I had spent with Kris had been amazing. Earth-shattering. When I'd fallen asleep in his arms after, I'd even imagined one night might stretch into more. But he was gone when I woke up, and I hadn't heard from him since.

Which was fine. I had asked for a single amazing night and that's what I got. Except that clearly wasn't *all* I'd gotten. "He made it pretty clear our hook-up was a one-night thing. So I don't think he's going to want to pursue anything with me. But he should get to know about the baby."

"You going to tell me who he is?"

My heart pounds, but I just offer her a smile. "I will. As soon as I tell him about the baby. I'll tell you who he is. Promise." I stand and wash my hands, even though I'd already done that. "Ready to go?"

Ginger comes to her feet. "You sure you're still up for the cookie exchange? You know how my mom and all her friends can be?"

"Do I get to bring cookies home with me?"

"Of course. That's the point."

"Then let's go. Mama needs some cookies." I follow Ginger out of my house thankful that I won't see Kris there. The men never show up to these parties. But I will have to contact him. I guess I'll send him a text and see if he can meet me later for a chat. So much for our no-strings night.

chapter **seventeen**

Kris

THE AMOUNT of noise a group of can women cause is kind of astounding. And the party hasn't even started yet. Mom has me here helping to move chairs into the main living area for her big annual cookie exchange. At least I get my pick of the baked goods before I'll be exiled from the house.

And at least I don't have to worry about racing out of here before I see her. Annie is Jewish and doesn't typically join in for the Christmas festivities that my parents insist on hosting. Year after year. Ugly sweater parties. Cookie exchanges. Secret Santa's. Ornament making. Gingerbread house building. It's a never-ending celebration of red and green and enough to make me fucking hate Christmas.

Okay, I don't actually hate the holiday, but I don't love it like the rest of the Starr family. As a kid, I'd loved it, but back then I just got the end result...the presents, the cookies. The planning for all of these events starts in like June. My mom just goes all out. My dad has a big light show that's actually choreographed to a local radio station. They're insane people. I love them, don't get me wrong, but when you've spent more than one Christmas sweating your balls off in the desert

hoping you don't lose anymore friends to IED's, you sorta lose that holiday spirit.

I wish I could get it back, but it's so damn hard when it feels like I have no clear path forward. No direction. No fucking idea what to do next.

I'm in the midst of hauling one last-minute folding table into the living room when I see my younger sister walk by. I pause, table in hand, and lower myself to kiss her cheek. "Ginger."

"Kristofer." She passes by me and heads to the room my mom has just called her.

Then I still because I know *she's* here. I've spent an entire month trying to forget the precise scent of her. So the moment I smell that subtle perfume I know she's behind me. I turn my face and my breath catches. She's so damn beautiful. Her black hair is tousled in soft waves around her face and as best I can tell she's free of make-up. Just naturally so pretty.

I swallow. "Annie."

I instantly want to pull her into my arms. To kiss the hell out of her.

She takes a deep breath. "Hey Kris, I actually wanted to talk to you about something. Do you have a minute?" Her hands are clasped in front of her and she's twisting her fingers together nervously.

Maybe she's been thinking about me as much as I've been thinking about her. About how our one night together wasn't enough. "Yeah, let me just set this table up for my mom and then I'm all yours."

I do just that and then find her just where I left her, standing awkwardly by the front door. I grab her arm and pull

her with me into my dad's study. "We should be able to talk in here." I'd like to bring her to my bedroom, but I don't want to be presumptuous, plus I still don't have a place of my own yet so I'd be bringing her up to my childhood room. At least I no longer have basketball posters lining my walls.

I slide closed the pocket door, saying, "I didn't think you'd be here today."

She frowns. "Why is that?"

"Aren't you Jewish? You don't actually celebrate Christmas, right?"

She chuckles and her smile is blinding. "Yes, I am Jewish and no I don't officially celebrate Christmas, but I'm also not a savage and I do celebrate all things cookies. So here I am." She opens her arms up as if presenting herself.

And I can't help myself. I cup her face and kiss her.

She tenses momentarily, then slides her arms around my neck moaning into my mouth. It is all the encouragement I need. I walk us backwards to the leather sofa and sit down, pulling her into my lap.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about this," I murmur as I kiss and lick down her throat. "About you. The way you taste. That way you feel when I'm deep inside you."

"Me neither."

"Perhaps we were premature making a rule about just one night." I fondle her tit as I gently suck on her neck.

"What are you saying?"

"That I fucking want you, Annie. That I'm not done with you yet."

“But I have something I need to tell you.”

“Unless you need to tell me to stop, then it can wait.” I meet her gaze. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No.” She grinds herself down onto my rapidly hardening cock.

“You have to be quiet so no one can hear us because they’re just outside that wall.” I motion to the wall behind us that’s floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

She nods and grinds herself down on me again. I’m thrilled she’s wearing a dress today and I can already feel the heat from her damp pussy as she presses onto my athletic shorts.

I reach under her skirt and slide my thumb against the front of her wet underwear. “Oh God,” she whispers. Her hands go to the waistband of my shorts and she pulls them down enough to release my cock.

I slide her panties to the side, then she’s lowering herself onto me.

Fuck she feels so good. So right. Like her body was made just for mine. “Can you be quiet?”

She bites her lip as she begins to move her body and she whimpers.

I kiss her, swallowing her mewls of pleasure as she rides me. I release her mouth, then press my palm to her lips to muffle any other noises.

“This good, baby?”

She nods and licks across my palm. I swallow my own groan.

“You’re so damn sexy,” I whisper. “Do you know that?”

She shakes her head and she squeezes her eyes shut. Then she's coming all over my cock. Her pussy tightening on me like a vice. I grab her hips and pump her up and down on me until I shoot my own release deep inside her. It's in that moment that I realize I'm bare.

"Shit, Annie, we didn't use a condom. I'm so sorry, baby, I didn't—"

She puts a finger to my lips, then she swallows visibly. She's still flushed from her climax and she looks so perfect straddling me like this. "It doesn't matter. That's what I wanted to tell you."

I frown, shake my head. "Tell me what?"

"I'm pregnant."

My world closes in and I swear black dots swim across my eyes. I haven't had a panic attack since I left Baghdad. But this one is coming on fast and strong. My heart is pounding, and the burst of adrenaline hits so hard, my hands are shaking as I pick her up off of my lap and tuck myself back into my pants.

"I'm sorry." I mumble, then I leave the room as fast as I can before I completely black out or worse.

chapter **eighteen**

Annie

SHIT!

None of that was supposed to happen. He wasn't supposed to freak out and run away. And I wasn't supposed to sleep with him again. And frankly I'd needed that release because today had already been all kinds of fucked up.

But he said all those sweet things and I got caught up, romanticizing his words. He hadn't said anything about caring about me. He'd talked only about sex. But I'd lost myself in the moment.

Because the truth was I wanted more. With him. Not just because of our baby. I wanted Kris. I'd always wanted Kris.

I find some tissue to clean myself up and then fix my underwear and skirt. Then I sit back on the sofa, hiding in Mr. Starr's study because I don't know what to do now. My hand naturally settles on my lower belly. It'll just be the two of us. I know that Kris will do right by me as far as any financial responsibilities, but maybe that's as far as it will go.

Of course I wouldn't want him to be with me only because of the baby. I want him to pick me. A picture across the room catches my eye. There's a cluster of framed family candid

shots scattered on the bookshelves. But this one I recognize because I have a copy of it too. It's me and Kris at my senior prom. I stand and walk over there, picking up the black framed photograph.

I'm wearing a hideous pink dress, but he looks so handsome. His hair tightly cropped to his head. Jarheads, they call them.

He'd been home on leave and my date had backed out on me so Kris had shown up, dressed in a suit. Back then it had felt like the most important night of my young life. I'd hoped it was the beginning of something between us. The way he'd looked at me when we'd danced and everywhere we walked that night, he kept his hand settled on my lower back.

I trace my finger down the glass covered photo. Tears fall, slowly and silently, chilling my cheeks in their wake. I won't ever regret our night together, but I am sad, because I want more than one night.

I might as well admit it to myself, even if I can't admit it to him. Some part of me always dreamed we'd end up together. That he would be my forever guy.

My hand drifts to my belly. In some weird way, I guess he is my forever guy, because no matter what else happens, I'll always have some part of him in my life.

Of course this is when Ginger finds me. Because she's my best friend and she can always sense when I need her. I'm the same with her.

She takes one look at me and crosses the room. "Oh sweetie, it's going to be okay. I promise. I'll help you every step of the way, I know this is overwhelming."

I shake my head. “It’s not that.” I mean, that’s part of it, I guess. But mostly right now, it’s just him.

“Then what is it?”

“It’s the father. I told him.”

“And he didn’t take it well?” Ginger then frowns. “Did you call him?”

I shake my head. Shit, she’s going to hate me. “I’m sorry, Ginger, I really am. It’s Kris.”

Her gaze falls to the picture in my hand. Her mouth opens in a silent “O.”

“I know I should have told you and I know I should never have slept with him.” Again. “But I’ve always wanted him.”

“I mean I knew you had a crush on him growing up, but I figured it was just a thing. Why didn’t you tell me?” Then she shakes her head. “You know what? That doesn’t matter. I don’t matter right now. This is about you. Let’s grab some cookies and then I’ll take you home. We can order food and watch movies or whatever you want.”

I wipe at my eyes and give her a watery smile. “You’re the very best, you know that?”

“I do know that. And as soon as I get my hands on that ass of a brother of mine...”

“Ginger, don’t.” I grab her hand. “I shouldn’t have told him the way I did. I’m sure he’s just processing the information. And I mean we used a condom so this shouldn’t have even happened.”

“But it did happen. He was raised to take responsibility for his actions. He’s better than this.” She squeezes my hand. “I will give him the benefit of the doubt and hope he comes to his

senses by tomorrow. If not, I make no promises about his ability to father future offspring.”

I laugh despite the situation because that’s what Ginger does. She’s always there for me.

chapter **nineteen**

Kris

I RING the doorbell and wait for it to open. Ginger's boyfriend opens the door.

"Hey man, we were just talking about you." He narrows his gaze at me, like he's trying to decide whether or not to punch me.

With my background, I know he can't take me, but I don't blame him for thinking about it.

"Yeah, I bet."

"Is that my shithead of a brother?" Ginger's voice comes from inside their place.

"Yes," I answer as I follow Brock into the kitchen.

Ginger is sitting at their table surrounded by yards of green garland and red ornaments and bows. She's got a glue gun in her hand which she waves menacingly at me.

"Sit down," she snaps.

Brock must have decided not to punch me, because he opens a beer and sets it in front of me. "Here, man, I think you're going to need this."

Then he goes back to the stove where he's making something that smells delicious. Herby with a hint of citrus.

"Thanks." I take a swallow, then look at my younger sister. She's still giving me the stink eye. "I freaked out."

"No kidding. The exact opposite reaction a woman needs or deserves when she tells you she's pregnant."

I rake my fingers through my hair. "I know. I don't mean the normal I-just-found-out-I'm-going-to-be-a-father-freak-out, I mean I had an actual panic attack."

Her eyes warm and her face softens with sympathy. "I thought you hadn't had one in months."

"I haven't. Not since I left." I rub the back of my neck. "Yesterday's wasn't even as bad as I thought it was going to be, but the minute it started I had to get out of there because I didn't want to hurt her or scare her." The truth was once I left the room and then my parent's house, all I wanted was to see Annie. To hold her and tell her it would all be okay. That we'd figure it out together. But some of the panic attacks I'd had before my discharge had been bad. A couple of times I'd lashed out at people if they tried to touch me. The thought of hurting Annie made me sick.

"Kris, you should have said something."

"Why? So she can have even more to deal with than being unexpectedly pregnant?" I scrub a hand down my face, wishing I could rub away my memory of Annie's expression as I fled the room. "She doesn't need my sorry ass with my baggage. Fuck, Ginger, I don't even have a job yet. I still live with our parents. I'm a loser."

She points that glue gun at me again. "Do not ever say that again. There is nothing about you that makes you a loser. You

fought for our country and you might not have scars that people can see, but you paid a price over there. It's a gift that you're able to stay with mom and dad until you figure out the next step. There's no rush. And none of that makes you a loser."

"She's totally right." Brock says this as he sets down a plate of what looks like miniature tacos. He returns a minute later with bowls of guacamole and salsa.

"What's with the tiny food?" I ask.

Brock nods to Ginger. "Your sister."

"They're just so cute." She makes a squealing noise. "I love tiny tacos. I don't know why. Thankfully my sweetheart indulges my strangeness."

Brock kisses her on top of the head and then walks back to the island where he grabs a few more items before returning with them.

"Babe, can we maybe put the wreath-making up while we eat? I don't want to get guac on your pretty stuff."

"Oh right." Ginger stands and gathers her craft supplies and swiftly moves them to the window seat.

"You know I might have a lead for you on a job, if you're interested," Brock says. He fills a plate with miniature Mexican food and passes it to Ginger, then does the same and hands it to me.

"What kind of job? Because I know exactly shit about art."

Brock laughs. "No, not that. But I hired a security company a couple of months ago to handle an event at the gallery. Evidently they're made primarily of ex-military guys.

They're pretty cool. And the office is in Corpus, so not too far."

The knot that has been tight in my gut loosens a bit. I couldn't imagine working in a normal office, with civilians who had never served. But security work with ex-military guys sounded doable. "Yeah, I'd like that. Thanks, man."

We all eat in silence for a while and I have to admit that small or not, the food tastes amazing.

"Okay, pretend with me for a minute," Ginger says. "Let's say you have a job that you like that you're good at. You get good benefits, have a decent salary. You're able to move out of the parental unit's abode. If all of that was just right, where would that leave you and Annie? Do you want to be with her?"

I release a sigh because I know the truth. I'm damaged goods. "Even with all of that, I won't be good enough for her. She's amazing. Smart and beautiful and she's done this incredible thing with her photography and design." I rub a hand down my face. "I want to be a part of her life, of course, a part of the baby's life. But she deserves better than anything I could ever offer her."

"That's what love is though, man," Brock says. "You think I'm good enough for your sister? I'm not. I know that. And I'll spend every day for the rest of our lives doing my damndest to deserve her. I'll never reach it, but I'll never stop trying. That's love."

Ginger grabs Brock's face and kisses him. "I love you and you totally deserve me."

"We'll have to disagree on that one, babe."

“I know you haven’t been with Annie. It’s not like y’all dated. But you know her. We all hung out. We did things together,” Ginger says. “You and her used to gang up on me in those water gun fights in the back yard, don’t think I’ve forgotten any of that. You took her to prom when that loser Vince Simmons bailed on her. Y’all have always had a connection. I don’t know why I didn’t see it until yesterday.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I just mean that y’all aren’t starting at zero. You have a foundation to your relationship. You’re friends. You need to talk to her. Apologize for how you reacted yesterday, but explain it to her. She needs to know about the panic attacks.”

“I care about her. A lot.” I more than cared about her, but I wasn’t sure yet how to label it. I’d been thinking a lot over the last month about all the things we’d shared growing up. Ginger was right, we weren’t starting at zero. I’d once considered Annie one of my closest friends. We’d lost touch when I joined the Marines. But I’d thought of her time and again when I was over there.

“Then just tell her that,” Brock says. “You don’t have to make any promises if you don’t feel comfortable doing that. But just so you know I told your sister I loved her after one date.”

Ginger’s smile lights up the room. “That you did. After embarrassing yourself with that Santa-suit lip-sync.”

“You loved every minute of it.”

“I did. Because I love you.”

“Y’all are gross.” I say the words, but I say them with a smile, because the fact that my baby sister is this happy means

everything to me. I stand. “Thanks for the advice. And the tiny food. I believe I have a woman to apologize to.”

“Oh Kris, she’s working right now. Photographing some guy down at the park,” Ginger says.

I nod and head out. I’ve got to make a quick stop and then find her with some guy. Nothing about that sounds or feels right. She doesn’t belong with any other guy. She belongs with me. If only I had something to offer her.

chapter **twenty**

Annie

“YEAH, THAT LOOKS GREAT,” I tell Matt. “This time let’s put the shirt back on, but only partially.”

He laughs. “What is that about? I’ve seen that on lots of covers. Makes it look like the dude doesn’t know how to take off or put on clothes.”

“It sells books, that’s all you need to worry about.” I hold the camera up to my eye and check the angle. “Put your right hand right at your abs like you’re rubbing your stomach.” He does as I instruct. “But don’t cover up the goods.”

He laughs again.

“Matt, stop laughing. You’re supposed to be serious and brooding.”

He tilts his head back and shakes it. Then looks forward again with a scowl. “Okay, I’m serious now. But you’re fucking hilarious, Annie.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m everyone’s favorite funny girl. Now stand there and look hot and moody.” I take several shots, give him a few more instructions. Then I notice him seeming

distracted by something behind me. I glance over my shoulder and my heart trips at the sight.

Kris is standing there glaring at Matt, while holding a bouquet of flowers.

“Maybe we should take a break,” Matt says. “That looks like a man on a mission.”

I force out a laugh, but inside my nerves are in knots. I say my goodbyes to Matt and let him know I’ll send him proofs when I get them cleaned up.

He puts his shirt all the way back on, then walks past Kris and mumbles something that sounds like ‘good luck.’

I finish putting my camera away in my bag and close everything up. Then I finally turn to Kris.

“I owe you an apology,” he says. He comes closer, holds out the flowers to me.

There’s something about them that looks familiar but I can’t immediately place them.

“And an explanation.”

“It’s okay, Kris. I know I ambushed you yesterday. I’d just found out and was still reeling and then the other thing happened.” I shake my head.

“I was relieved of duty because I was having panic attacks. On the field, in the middle of important operations. I put myself in danger. I put the rest of my unit in danger.” He scrubs a hand down his face.

There’s so much pain in his voice and his expression that I just want to hold him. I knew there’d been something that had happened, but I’d assumed it was an injury of sorts.

“PTSD was the official diagnosis with acute panic attacks. I haven’t had one since I’ve been back in Texas, but yesterday —”

“Oh my God, I triggered an attack? I’m so sorry.” I can’t help myself now, I reach for him, putting my hand on his arm and giving it a squeeze.

“No, you didn’t do anything. And, as it turns out, it wasn’t a full blown event. But I was worried I could hurt you. There were two incidents when everything first happened where I lashed out at people when they touched me in the middle of an attack.” He cups my face. “I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt you, Annie.”

“I’m not afraid.” I step away from him to fiddle with my camera bag because standing this close to him hurts. “And I understand your reaction better so all is forgiven. We can decide together how and when we want to tell our perspective families. I know your mom is going to be over the moon. But my parents don’t get back for another week and I don’t want them accidentally finding out on social media or something.”

“We can wait however long you want to tell people. Though obviously Ginger and Brock know.”

“Yes, but they’re sworn to secrecy,” I say.

“Can I tell you more things?” he asks.

“You can tell me whatever you want. I’m always here if you need me, Kris.” And I mean that even knowing that he doesn’t care about me the way I care about him. He means too much to me for me to abandon him.

“I don’t have a job which means I have no real way to support you or a child.”

I want to interrupt and tell him I don't need that from him nor was I asking, but his face looks so determined and he clearly has more to say.

"I'm currently living with my parents. I see a therapist once a week. I'm broken in ways that no one can see on the outside and you think I'm this perfect hero and God, Annie, I want to be a hero to you." His hand forks through his hair making it stand up on end in a haphazard way. "But I know all I'll do is disappoint you."

"I don't think you're perfect."

"But what about those guys?" He motions to the direction where Matt left.

"First of all, Matt is married. To a guy named Steve. Secondly, I don't sleep with the guys I photograph, nor do I hero worship them. They're just guys."

He shakes his head. "No, I meant like the guys in the books. That's what you're looking for, right?"

My heart is pounding and my stomach is doing the twist, but I've got to make it through this conversation. "The heroes in romance novels aren't perfect men. There's nothing perfect about those relationships. That's actually the beauty of them. They're about imperfect people finding love and making sacrifices to be together."

"Do you think you'd want to be with a man like that?" He steps closer so that he's directly in front of me again. "A man with problems like mine?"

"A man like you? Or you? What are you asking me, Kris? Because I have to be honest, I know your issues seem big to you. Because they're yours and they've changed the trajectory of your life and I don't want to negate any of that. But the

truth is that lots of people have mental and emotional issues. Lots of people go to therapy. I, as evidenced by my ass, self-medicate with ice cream.”

“I like your ass.”

“Thank you. My point is that I’m not some starry eyed teenager looking for a caricature of a real man. I’m not looking for a facsimile of a hero from a romance novel. I want what Ginger and Brock have. I want that forever kind of love. None of that ever comes with perfection. I mean, I know I am far from perfect myself so I’d never expect that from anyone else.”

“I don’t know, Annie, I think you’re pretty damn perfect.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket and taps the screen a few times and music starts to play. He holds his arms out to me. “Dance with me?”

“Here? Now?”

“Yeah.”

I go into his arms and he holds me tight to him while he sways me to the music. The words in the song start and immediately I’m flooded with memories. The balloons on the floor, the streamers hanging from everywhere. Bad punch. The smell of too much hairspray and cologne all mixed together. “We danced to this at my prom.”

“We did.”

My eyes drift over to the picnic table where I’ve set the flower bouquet. That’s where I’ve seen that specific collection of flowers before. “That’s the same as my corsage from that night.”

“Yes.” I bite down on my lip for a moment, then ask, “Could you tell that night how much I wanted to kiss you?”

His Caribbean blue eyes settle on mine. “Yeah. Could you tell how much I wanted the same?”

“You wanted to kiss me?”

“That night and so many others,” he says.

I’m beginning to wonder if my heart can actually pound out of my chest. Surely that would be bad for the baby. “Then why didn’t you?”

“You were seventeen.”

“Two months away from eighteen,” I say.

“But I was already in the marines. I couldn’t start something with you and then leave.” He stops our dancing and cups my face again. “And I kept thinking that my feelings would fade because who meets their soulmate when they’re teenagers?”

“Soulmate?”

“Annie Fitzpatrick, I’m in love with you. And I suspect I have been for years. I’m scared as fuck about getting everything with you wrong and not being able to provide or be a good father, but I want to be with you. I want to have a family with you.”

I’m crying now, but I don’t even care. “You love me?”

“Yeah, baby, I do. So fucking much. I know I don’t deserve you. That you deserve a better man, a more complete man. But I’m a selfish ass and I want you to be mine.”

“I don’t want anyone but you. I love you too.”

epilogue

Kris

ONE YEAR *later*

I stand in front of our Christmas tree which is decorated with blue and silver lights, tiny menorah's and dreidels. We've made our own holiday, blending parts of both of us. I look down in my arms at our four-month old son, Asher, as I tell him about our various family traditions.

I hear the stairs creak behind us and turn to see my gorgeous wife.

“Morning, Beautiful.”

She gives me a quick kiss, then kisses the baby's head. He has wisps of black hair, like hers, but he has my eyes.

“You didn't wake me,” she says.

“I wanted you to sleep. How are you feeling?”

Her hand goes to her stomach and she smiles. “I'm okay. We might need to lock down that super sperm of yours though after this little nugget comes along.”

Yep, we're pregnant again. Annie's photography and cover design business is booming and yours truly has been on a handful of covers. As have some of my co-workers from the security company where I now work.

"Merry Christmas," Annie says.

"Merry Christmas, baby, I love you."

Asher starts to fuss in my arms and my wife reaches for him. "He's hungry."

"You're perfect, babe," I tell her.

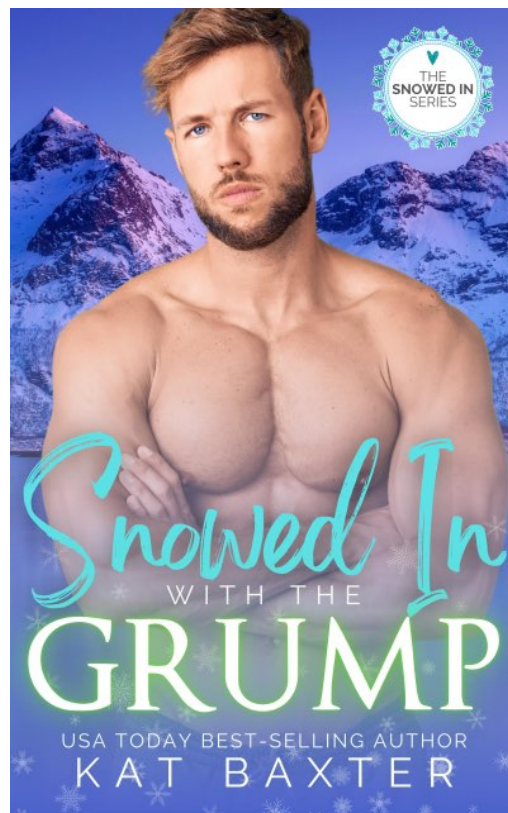
She rolls her eyes, but smiles. "Kris, I left my phone upstairs. Is your ringer on?"

"Yes. We'll know the minute Brock calls us."

"Only Ginger would go into labor on Christmas Eve."

I stand by the tree and watch the love of my life nurse our perfect son while she's growing our next child. I'm the luckiest son of a bitch there ever was.

snowed in with the grump



Jackie

This year, all I want for Christmas is to not see my ex-boyfriend's wife flashing her baby bump all around town. When my best friend gifts me a week at a mountain cabin, I jump at the chance to get out of Saddle Creek for the holidays. Except instead of solitude and hot cocoa, I find the last thing I expect: Luca Daniels.

Not only is Luca the hottest guy I've ever known, but he's also my best friend's older brother. Apparently, he thinks the cabin is his for the week. But this is my vacation and I'm too stubborn to leave. If he finds my infectious Christmas joy annoying, then he can choke on a sugar plum! We've never gotten along and could legitimately argue about anything. So color me surprised when we're snowed in together, and I realize the line between love and hate just might be thinner than the stripes on a candy cane.



chapter **twenty-one**

Jackie

When I was ten years old, the one thing I wanted, more than anything else for Christmas, was that beauty doll salon head. Even at that tender age, I already knew I wanted to be a hair stylist and I wanted to practice. Especially since I'd already gotten in trouble for giving the dog a trim and braiding my baby sister's hair so tightly, it made her cry.

Instead, my father bought me an erector set, because *he* wanted me to grow up to be an architect. That Christmas taught me two things: first, I would probably always be a disappointment to my father. Second, you can't let anyone else dictate what you do with your life or Christmas won't be the only thing that gets ruined.

What I know now that I didn't understand then is that my dad just wanted me to be successful enough to support myself financially so that I would never have to rely on a man. Me? I just wanted to take care of other people and help them feel pretty. I've always believed that everyone is beautiful in their own way. I just want to help people see that.

Do I make tons of money? No. But I make enough to support myself, so my dad and I are both happy.

But that early lesson about my dad's expectations for me? Sometimes, it still stings. Sometimes, I wonder if even back then he knew something I didn't. If he sensed that my path to love, family, and domestic stability wouldn't be smooth. Or exist at all.

If he had known, I sure wish he'd given me a head's up. I could have used some warning on that front. My love life has been a shit show for more than a decade now, ever since my high school sweetheart, Matt Hardin broke up with me.

The kicker? Matt didn't actually want to break up with me. His best friend, Luca Daniels, the asshole to end all assholes, convinced him that I wasn't good enough for him.

Way to be a dick, right?

How was that even Luca's business?

Now, don't get me wrong, it's been a few years since graduation—more like a decade—and it's not that I'm still bitter. I look at Matt now and see his thinned hair and his paunchy belly and I wonder if things would have been different had he stayed with me, instead of marrying Sylvie Smith.

But that's just one of those things I'll never know. Thanks to the aforementioned Luca Daniels, who unfortunately doesn't have thinning hair or a paunchy belly. Nope, he's still as hot and delicious looking now as he was when we were seniors. Even more so, if I'm being honest. And though I *want* to hate the guy, I can't even do that because I've seen how he treats his younger sister, Savannah—who just so happens to be my closest friend and fellow hair stylist.

I work in her salon. She's much younger than I am. In fact, she's closer to my little sister, Roni's age. Still, Savannah and I

work together every day and you can't be that close on a daily basis—especially in a town the size of Saddle Creek—and not become friends. Maybe the fact that her brother and I don't get along would be more of a problem, but he's a big FBI agent somewhere and doesn't grace us with his presence very often.

So aside from Savannah's wedding earlier this year, I haven't had to deal with seeing Luca's stupid handsome face all that often. Ugh, why am I even thinking about him?

The truth is, I just need a little break from Saddle Creek and all the things. Things that I don't particularly want to think about right now.

Like the fact that if I have to see one more pregnant belly, I just might scream. Okay, that's probably not completely true. It's more likely that I'll fall to pieces, and no one wants that. Least of all me. Especially this close to Christmas.

I just thought that by now in my life I'd be married with a couple of kids under foot and instead I'm not even dating anyone. Haven't in years. So there's no hope of a baby unless I want to do that on my own, which I consider periodically.

Which is obviously why, two days ago, Savannah, my dear sweet friend and one of the pregnant bellies, pulled me aside at the back of the salon.

“Jackie, you have not eaten any Hot Fries in nearly two weeks, and I'm concerned.”

In any other circumstance, I probably would have found her legitimate concern about me giving up my favorite snack humorous. Most days it seemed like I was on the edge of an emotional breakdown. And I refused to make Savannah feel bad about her baby or her perfect marriage.

“I got a bad batch a while back and just lost my taste for them for a while.” I shrug. “It’s truly nothing to worry about.”

Her hand goes to her rounded belly. Savannah’s curvy, like me, so maybe some might not even realize that she’s growing a baby in there. But a plus sized bump is still a bump, and the truth is, I’m jealous.

She gives me a sweet grin. “Ren booked this baby moon cabin trip for us, but I just don’t want to go. I’m still having morning sickness and the thought of sitting in a car and driving up to the Arbuckle mountains in Oklahoma makes me want to cry. So, I’m gifting you the trip. I’ve already rescheduled your clients.”

I stare at my friend, disbelieving her words. No one has ever given me a trip, even one that will be just a few hours north of where I live. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. Mrs. Lyttle was annoyed, but I assured her that I could cut and curl her hair just as well or she could wait until you returned.”

I snort. “I’m guessing she’s waiting.”

“Oh yes, I’m far too inexperienced to know what I’m doing with hair like hers. The texture is complex.”

“So true, so true. You could never figure out how to cut and style hair that’s thick and wavy. So complex.” I stare at my friend for a minute. “Are you sure about the cabin though?”

“Absolutely. You need this. Go and rest and enjoy yourself. I’ll email you all the details.”

Now I am half an hour’s drive away from the cabin and snow is falling sparkly on my windshield. The flakes are tiny and not sticking yet, but I know there is more in the forecast.

My phone rings over my SUV speakers, and I press the button to answer.

“Tell me again when you’ll get back?” my sister asks.

“It’s just a few days. I’ll be back before Christmas so no worries on that. Are you working today?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“Of course I am. This is our busiest season.”

Roni works at the downtown sweet shop where she helps make fudge and other spun sugary treats to sell for her boss, Nash Lloyd.

“Is he giving you any time off?” I ask.

Roni makes a sweet sound. “I don’t need time off, Jack. I love my job.”

I’m pretty sure she thinks she loves her boss, besides the fact that he’s way too old for her. But I don’t say anything because we’ve argued about that way too much.

“Just don’t let him take advantage of you,” I say.

“He would never. Nash is so good to me,” Roni says.

“You better have Christmas day off.”

She laughs. “Of course I do, silly. We’re closed on Christmas.”

“I’ll be back by then and we can have some sister time.”

She hums in agreement. “Sounds nice. You sure you’ll be okay up in that cabin all alone?”

“Yes. I’ve got my e-reader fully loaded with steamy holiday rom-coms to keep me entertained. My cooler in the back is loaded down with food I already cooked and then froze, and now all I’ll have to do is heat it up.”

“You’re all set then,” Roni says.

“I am. Take care of yourself while I’m gone and go see Ren and Savannah if you need anything.”

“I’m good, big sis. Promise.”

“Love you, Roni.”

“Love you too, Jack.”

It’s quiet the rest of the drive to the cabin. Dusk is approaching and the way the light snow bounces off the road and hood of my car makes me smile. It will be so nice to have some quiet alone time.

Fifteen minutes later I pull into the gravel drive and park. I’ve already got to pee so bad I can barely stand it, so I head to the cabin door in search of a bathroom.

Instead, I find the cutest squatty black dog with a white splotch on her chest. Her long ears nearly scrape the ground when she tilts her head in curiosity.

I get down to her level to read her tags. Maybe I’m in the wrong cabin. But that wouldn’t explain how Savannah’s instructions for the keypad worked to unlock the door.

I finger the bone-shaped silver tag hanging from the pup’s collar.

“Mabel, huh? Well, then Mabel, what do you suppose you’re doing here all alone? I don’t suppose you have a gorgeous owner here with you who is fully equipped to hand out mind-blowing orgasms?”

“Fuck my life.”

chapter **twenty-two**

Luca

I've only been at the cabin for about half an hour when I hear another car drive up. I walk back around to the front with my armload of firewood that I'd been gathering from the shed out back to see a black SUV with Texas plates.

You don't get as far as I have in the FBI without being a suspicious sort, so I quietly set down the firewood and pull the gun I have in my back holster. I open the door without making a sound and come face to face—face to ass? Shit. There is a curvy as fuck woman, on her hands and knees, plump, round ass, encased in red, white and green plaid leggings, in the air as she baby talks to my dog.

Wait a minute, I know her voice. My eyes eat up the dangerous curves in front of me. I know her body too. Lord knows I've spent enough time staring at it and fantasizing about it.

“Mabel, huh?” Jackie Cuevas says. That sassy voice lives in my dreams. “Well, then Mabel, what do you suppose you're doing here all alone? I don't suppose you have a gorgeous owner here with you who is fully equipped to hand out mind-blowing orgasms?”

“Fuck my life,” I say.

She shrieks, then manages to get to her feet. Her sultry brown eyes take me in, growing wider by the second.

“For the record, I’m definitely equipped to hand out mind-blowing orgasms. You just need to ask.”

Her mouth falls open.

“I’m going to get the rest of the firewood. I take it we have my sister to thank for this cozy reunion?”

“What the hell are you talking about and why are you here? This is my cabin.” She stomps one foot on the ground and it’s so fucking adorable I have to turn away so I don’t grin at her.

I go back outside and grab the armload of firewood. On my way back in, she’s standing right there.

“Why are you here?” she asks again.

“Ren gave me the cabin; said he got it for them and they couldn’t use it.” I shrug and slide past her, hauling the wood to the main fireplace.

“But why would he do that when Savannah gave the trip to me?” she shrieks.

I pause to look at her. “All your stuff still in your car?”

She nods.

“I’ll get it. Go to the bathroom; you’ve been squirming around since you got here.”

When I come back in with the last of her stuff, she’s on the floor and Mabel is laying across her lap.

“Traitor,” I mumble to my dog.

“She’s the sweetest, bestest girl ever. Aren’t you, Mabel?”

“She’s a very good girl.”

“What is she?”

“Half Bassett Hound, half Labrador. Makes her look a bit like a mutant with her squatty legs and long ears, but her obvious lab features. But she’s smart as a whip.”

“You’re not a mutant, are you, baby?” Jackie coos.

I am not prepared for having this woman talk like that to my dog. And my body’s reaction makes no sense. But nothing about the way I react to Jackie makes sense. I’ve wanted her for so damn long, I don’t know who I am without that desire.

“I think it’s a set-up,” I say. Because I’m pretty sure my sister suspects how I feel about Jackie.

She stares at me as if trying to read a secret message between my words. “Wait, so you think Savannah and Ren set us up on purpose?” Jackie asks.

“Most definitely.”

“Like you don’t think it was just miscommunication on their part where they didn’t realize they’d each given away the cabin to someone?”

I shake my head. “No. This was completely intentional.”

Jackie frowns. “A set up?” Then recognition lights her features. “Like that kind of set up?!” Her voice gets louder and higher as the pieces come together in her mind. “Between you and me? But you hate me.”

Those words splay me open like a filet knife. “I do not hate you, Jackie.”

“Why the hell would they do that? They know we don’t get along and Savannah gave me this trip because she knows I’ve been stressed out lately?”

I squat to scratch Mabel between the ears. “Why are you stressed out?”

Jackie shakes her head. She rolls over and stands. “I just don’t understand why.”

“Right.” She types on her phone, clearly sending a text message to someone. Probably my sister. “Which is why you convinced Matt to dump me a week before graduation.”

“That’s not exactly what happened,” I say. Yes, I was responsible for her and my former best friend, Matt Hardin’s break-up.

Jackie shoots me an annoyed look, then she frowns at her phone, makes a gasping noise and types out another message.

The truth was Matt had been cheating on Jackie. I knew she’d be heartbroken if she found out. So, I’d forced him to break her heart a different way. I wasn’t going to stand by and watch him marry her and continue to sleep around behind her back. Jackie deserved to be loved and adored.

But she didn’t want that from me.

“It’s snowing too much now and it’s going to be dark soon,” I say. “But I’ll leave in the morning, and you can have the cabin to yourself tomorrow.”

She opens her mouth, then closes it with a nod.

“I’ll get a fire going,” I say.

“I have food cooked; I just need to heat it up,” she says.
“Carne asada okay with you?”

My stomach growls in response.

She grins. “This isn’t an only one bed trope scenario, is it?”

I stare at her. “Those words don’t make any sense to me.”

“You know, like in a book? The cabin.” She motions with her hands. “Do we have to share a bed?”

Only if I’ve been a very good boy this year and Santa already got my wish list. But I find myself shaking my head. “There are two bedrooms.”

She nods, her shoulders visibly relaxing.

I busy myself with the fire while Jackie moves into the kitchen.

REN: Did you get my present? Merry Christmas.

ME: I did. She’s not amused.

REN: Give her some time.

REN: Here’s an idea. Tell her the truth so you’re not the villain in her story.

ME: Not that easy.

REN: Make a move, old man.

ME: She might actually kill me.

REN: There’s this spot on a woman and if you touch it just right, it’ll make her too pliant to want to kill you.

ME: Conversation over.

REN: You don't want to hear about your sister's special spot?

ME: I will kill you and make it look like an accident. Now I'm blocking your number.

From behind me I hear a popping noise. I turn to find Jackie, hips swaying, while she stirs a pot at the stove. A peppermint stick hangs out between her lips.

She reaches up and drags it out of her mouth, again with that popping sound.

Goddamn, she's sexy. "Do you have to do that?" I ask, my voice sounding harsh.

She turns and sticks one hand on her hip. "Why? Does it bother you?"

"Yes. It really does." And it makes my dick hard as a fucking pipe. For obvious reasons, I can't tell her that.

She gives me a sweet smile, then sticks the peppermint back in between her lips. "Then, yes. I do have to do it."

Her lips close over the candy, her cheeks hollow as she sucks. Then she slowly pulls the stick out.

Pop.

"Don't you know by now, Luca? I was put on this earth to annoy you."

I turn away from her and have to adjust my hard-on again before I take Mabel out for a quick potty break. What would Jackie say if she knew that annoyance wasn't even close to what she was making me feel?

chapter

twenty-three

Jackie

Just focus on the food.

I've had to repeat that at least thirty times since I started putting the meal together. Finally, everything is heated and ready to eat and I get dishes out. True to his word, Luca got a nice fire going in the living room and has since been sitting quietly with Mabel.

"How long have you had her?" I ask, while I set everything out on the island countertop. "This is ready, if you want to come make a plate."

He jumps up from his spot and washes his hands before grabbing a plate. "I got Mabel when she was just a couple months old. She's nearly four now, I guess.

We sit at the stools on the other side of the island, right next to one another, like we're friends. I mean I don't know what we are. I know once upon a time he didn't think I was good enough for his best friend. A guy he no longer even speaks to as far as I'm aware.

"You have any pets?" he asks.

I shake my head and chew my bite of taco before clarifying. “My dad was allergic to animal dander, so we just never had any growing up. I don’t know why I haven’t gotten one since he passed. I think I’d have to get a dog. I’m pretty sure cats don’t like me. At least your sister’s cat doesn’t.”

He snorts. “My sister’s cat doesn’t like anyone but her and Ren.”

I watch him take a bite, and for whatever reason, I pause my own chewing, waiting to see if he likes it. I don’t know why; I already know I’m a good cook.

Then his eyes close. And he moans, long and loud.

I just stare at him while he chews.

When he finally opens his eyes, he gives me a guilty shrug. “I’m sorry. This is really amazing. I haven’t been able to find any good carne asada by where I live.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not that hard to make.”

“I’m serious, Jackie.”

“Whatever.”

“Can you just take the compliment? I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. This is fucking delicious.”

I nod and eat a few more bites.

“So, how’s business for you at the salon?” he asks.

“Oh my gosh, please don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Try to make conversation like you’re not horrified to be trapped here with me. Like this is a perfectly normal evening of tacos shared with a friend.”

“Maybe I’m not horrified to be trapped here with you.”

“Please. Let’s not pretend this is anything other than a colossal fuck up on Savannah and Ren’s part. They clearly need better matchmaking skills.”

He gives me a thoughtful look, then clears his throat. “I know we’ve had our differences in the past, but I don’t think I’m that bad of a catch. I wasn’t forcing the conversation; I was genuinely asking about your business.”

Oh. I try to think of something to say to make it better, but my mind is blank.

He wipes his mouth with a napkin. “I’m going to go grab one more haul of firewood in case the snow gets worse than is forecasted. “Thanks for dinner.”

Then he disappears out the door with his faithful pup at his feet.

Ugh, now I feel like a mean, wretched bitch. I blow out a breath. Maybe I should suggest that we just forget we went to high school together. Forget we have a shared past and just start over. Maybe we can be friends.

I don’t know how I’m going to get any sleep at all tonight knowing that there is nothing but a wall between me and Luca.

Why does he have to look so good all the time? And smell so good?

I snuggle under the fluffy down comforter and open up my e-reader. Thankfully I’m already in the middle of a delicious bully romance and the heroine just discovered that the hot guy she’s been chatting up online is actually her nemesis. So I know it’s about to get good.

It doesn't take me too long to sink back into the story. Oh damn, and it doesn't take long for the hero to sink to his knees and eat the heroine out from behind.

Good grief, I've never had a man want me that badly, need me that urgently. I don't know why I devour these particular types of books, but I read them by the dozens. Characters that seem ill-suited, that seem to not match at all, that seem—by all accounts—to not get along, yet are so ultimately made for each other their chemistry is explosive. Bully romance is my particular catnip and it doesn't take a goddamn genius to figure out why. Luca and I might not get along, but I am obviously harboring some serious sexual fantasies about the man. And who could blame me? He's so damn sexy, he looks more like a male model than an FBI agent.

By the time I'm done reading the chapter, I'm so slick between my thighs I should be embarrassed. But fuck that.

You know what is embarrassing, though?

The whole time I was reading, I wasn't imagining the handsome blue-eyed, steely-jawed guy on the cover of the book. Nope. In my mind, the guy with his head between my thighs was Luca.

I turn off my reader, dousing the room in darkness, then set it on the bedside table.

For the record, I'm definitely equipped to hand out mind-blowing orgasms. You just need to ask.

Luca's words from earlier replay in my mind. I know he was being a smart ass, calling me out on what he caught me saying. Still, it's tempting. What would he say if I just crawled into the bed next to him and asked him to prove it to me?

I have a feeling when it comes to this particular fact, Luca is not all talk. He's got that kind of mouth, you know? You can just tell from looking at the curve of lips, the way he holds his jaw, that man knows how to kiss.

One thing's for sure, I've got to make myself come because I'm not going to go and ask him to do it. I slide my hand down my body, pausing to pinch my nipple, then twist it, before slipping it inside my panties.

I'm so slick that my fingers just glide over clit. I swallow a groan. Then I work my clit in small, tight circles, keeping my rhythm slow and steady. I want to squeeze my thighs together and go faster, pull my climax out quicker, but I know it will be bigger and more intense if I let it build.

I close my eyes, trying to go back to the mental pictures from my book. Instead, my stupid imagination conjures images of Luca hovering between my thighs. He tells me how badly he wants to fuck me, but that he's going to make me come first so he can hear me scream his name while he tastes my orgasm.

And that's what does it. I shudder and quake beneath the covers as I come faster than I ever have before. All because of one fantasy of Luca Daniels. Thank God he's leaving in the morning.

I'm not sure what wakes me up first, the fact that it's so ridiculously cold in the room or pressure on the bed.

"Jackie," Luca says into the darkness.

I sit up. "What's the matter?"

He holds out his phone on flashlight mode, the light directed away from us, but illuminating a bit of the bed. "The

power went off. It's cold as balls in my room."

As soon as he says it, I realize just how cold I already I am. I've got plenty of blankets, but I woke up shivering.

I blink up at him. "What do we do? Can we turn the generator back on or something?"

He looks like he's trying not to roll his eyes at me. Yeah, even cold and befuddled by sleep, I can annoy Luca. Like I told him earlier. It's my superpower.

"Sure," he says. "If you want to hold the flashlight for me, we can go stand out in the blizzard for an hour or so while I figure out how to turn the generator back on." He pauses for a beat while I imagine how fucking miserable that would be. "Or we can share body heat until morning and I can go do it once the sun is up."

Share a bed? Is he insane? Am I dreaming? I'm not sure that dreaming me would have the imagination to completely conjure the amount of musculature that Luca is working with. His body—what I can see of it—is a work of art.

He's shirtless and wearing only a dark-colored pair of boxer briefs. Holy habanero, he is literally sex on legs.

"I thought you said we wouldn't have to sleep in the same bed," I snap.

"I said there were two beds. But the power is out and the snow hasn't stopped." Without waiting for me to agree, he flips up the covers and slides into the bed next to me. "Hate me tomorrow, baby doll, tonight, I need your body to warm me up."

Hearing him growl the words, *I need your body* floods my pussy with moisture again. Have I always been this easy?

But then there he is, enveloping me in warmth as his huge, hard, nearly naked body snuggles next to mine.

“Wouldn’t we be warmer if we both layered on some clothes?” I ask.

“No. Skin to skin will warm us the fastest.”

The deep timbre of his voice right up against my ear is so intimate and close. This feels so unfamiliar and foreign, and yet something about it feels so completely safe and perfect. I shove that thought away so I don’t have to analyze it too deeply.

“I checked the temperature in my bedroom and it was already forty degrees.”

“Snuggling for necessity,” I say.

“Exactly.”

His lips are so close to my ear and my nipples tighten. The weight of his arm wrapped around my body holds me tightly to him, me the little spoon to his big spoon.

For a moment the rightness of how this feels takes my breath away. I am meant to fall asleep in a man’s arms. I feel that in my bones. I just need to find him.

chapter **twenty-four**

Luca

I wake up and I'm so warm, it feels as if my skin is on fire. Jackie and I are wrapped up in each other, our limbs tangled together in a cocoon of blankets. My dick is so hard nestled against the ripe curve of her body, it's a wonder I haven't come all over her in my sleep.

We're facing each other now and her arms are around me, her hands against my bare skin. Every single nerve ending is on alert, waiting for when she'll wake up and realize that it's me she's cuddled so closely with.

Until then I keep myself still, only allowing my eyes to move to further enjoy the experience of holding this woman.

Her shirt has shifted in her sleep and exposed the creamy expanse of one shoulder. I want to lean forward and nibble and lick at her skin, taste her, learn her sounds.

She whimpers and arches her body into mine. Her face tilts up and her lips press into my neck.

Diamond hard nipples dig into my bare chest, and I want to strip her naked. Boldly, I slide a hand up her stomach to cup one of her tits. The weight is heavy and full against my palm and the erect point begs for more attention.

“Luca,” she whispers, her voice heavy with sleep and lust.

Goddamn, I want this woman. I lean down and seal my lips over hers, slicking my tongue across the seam of her mouth. She opens to me and then it’s a slow fucking of our mouths. Tongues pulsing and flicking and stroking.

My hand continues stroking and teasing her breast and nipple.

She rolls her body so she’s more on her back, then tugs on me to follow. I settle myself into the cradle of her thighs, dropping the weight of my body onto hers, never breaking our kiss.

I can feel the heat of her pussy through the thin fabric of her panties and my boxers. I rock myself against her as I lick into her mouth. She groans and hikes her legs higher against my hips.

I don’t even remember a time in my life when I didn’t want this woman, and everything about the way we’re fitting together right now is so fucking perfect. Her nails rake up my back and I growl, deepening our kiss. I keep moving my body, mimicking how I would fuck her.

She makes little keening noises. Her lips pull away from mine and she gasps. I lick up her neck to that tender spot just below her ear and I nibble at the flesh there.

I pinch her nipple again and rock harder against her. I know she’s getting close.

“Oh God,” she cries out.

“That’s it, baby doll, let me hear you come.”

She gasps and her eyes fly open and lock on mine. “Luca,” she breathes my name as a climax shudders through her body.

For several perfect moments, she just lies there beneath me, eyes closed, lips parted, breath coming in long, shaking gasps. Then, slowly, her eyes blink open.

I smile down at her. “That was gorgeous.”

Her gaze goes slightly wide, then darts away. She bites down on her lip and nods, then squirms to move out from under me. Suddenly it’s like I’m doused with a bucket of snow.

“What’s the matter?” I ask, brushing my hand through my hair. I sit up, watching her straighten her clothes.

She shakes her head still not looking at me. “I don’t know why that happened. I’m sorry, Luca, I didn’t mean to use you like that. I know you don’t like me like that at all.” Then she jumps off the bed and disappears into the bathroom.

I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. What the fuck? What the actual fuck? She’s *sorry*? What the hell does that mean? “Goddammit!”

I get out of bed and go back to my room where I pull on sweats and a sweatshirt and some shoes. Then I find my sweet Mabel sleeping on her dog pillow in the living room where it’s actually still kind of warm. The fire is still going, but not very strong. But it’s still managed to keep this room heated.

“Who’s my smart girl staying out here where it’s warm?”

Mabel sits up and looks at me sleepily. Her tail thumps.

“You ready to go potty in the snow?”

I’m pretty sure she shakes her head no, but she still stands and walks her squatty legs over to the door.

I walk outside, not caring that it’s fucking freezing and I didn’t put on my coat. I’m not going to be outside long

enough. Though I should probably try to figure out how to turn on the generator.

“How did I mess that up so badly, Mabel?” I ask my dog while she sniffs around the snowy ground. “She was into it, pups. I thought I was finally going to get to have both of my girls.”

Mabel stares up at me with her soulful brown eyes. I sigh. What the fuck am I supposed to do now? I clearly can't leave like I said I was going to; the snow is too deep. And the plows won't have made it up on this mountain road.

Clearly, Jackie and I need to have a conversation though. If she doesn't want me the way I want her, that's fine, but enough of this bullshit where she thinks I hate her.

chapter **twenty-five**

Jackie

What the hell was I thinking?

I stand in the relative darkness of the bathroom just breathing. Oh, and freaking the hell out. That's happening too. Why had I kissed him?

I mean, yes, sleepy Jackie had woken up horny and wrapped all around all six foot whatever of hot, sexy Luca. He'd seemed like he wanted me, but gah, I'm such a fool! He'd only been making out with me because I'd been available, and I practically pulled him on top of me.

He'd kissed me first though, right?

And holy habanero, that man knew how to kiss. Not to mention the feel of his big hand on my tit and that rock hard dick sliding against my clit. I'd been so tempted to reach down and pull my panties aside to invite him inside.

I turn on the faucet and splash some freezing cold water on my face. I need to snap out of it. I had a weird lapse in judgement I'm just gonna chalk up to being so cold I couldn't think straight. Or being nearly naked next to the object of my sexual fantasies.

How would any woman have resisted him being that close in that situation? He's too damn tempting. I mean he'd been hard when he kissed me, but that was nothing more than morning wood, right? Just a biological function that all men experience.

Clearly, what I need to do is proceed with my trip as if he's not here. Just do what I was planning to do and try to ignore his presence the best I can.

I finish getting myself ready as much as I'm able without power, dressing in a pair of fur lined, candy cane striped leggings. They're ridiculous and normally way too hot to wear in Saddle Creek, but I love them because they're so festive and cute. In this situation, they'll work perfectly to keep me warm enough.

I pair them with my favorite Christmas sweater which has ribbons and bells hanging off it. It's delightfully tacky. No one ever accuses me of being a Scrooge. Then I put on my atrocious slippers that are basically just slipper socks covered in red, gold, green and white bows.

Earlier yesterday, I'd messaged Savannah and asked if she knew if they had Christmas decorations here at the cabin. She contacted the owners, and they directed me to the hall closet where I can pull everything out and get it started. Obviously, without electricity, the tree lights won't sparkle, but I can still decorate.

Thank goodness for battery-operated Bluetooth speakers, too. I pull up my favorite Christmas playlist and get started on everything.

Half an hour later, I've got the tree put together—thankfully it's pre-lit so no frustrations with untangling light strands. I sit myself down on the floor and tackle the ornament

boxes. I like that they're not just the customary glass globes and crystal balls. They have a variety of ornaments and setting them out in categories is half the fun. It does make me miss my own though.

Granted, my Christmas tree has already been up for several weeks. So, it's kinda cool to get to decorate another one this year.

The front door flies open and I jump to my feet.

Snow billows in around Luca and Mabel. The pup shakes her body, spraying snow further around the room. I'm thankful I'm further away from them, so I don't get covered.

Luca's face is perfectly set into a scowl. He wipes off his feet, stomping them onto the inside rug, despite the fact that he clearly cleaned off the snow outside.

He glances over at me, then takes a double take.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he asks.

"What does it look like I'm doing? Brushing my teeth?"

"Why the hell are you decorating when you're not going to be here for Christmas? That makes no sense. Who gave you permission to use their decorations? I know you didn't haul all this from home because I unloaded your car."

I glare back at him, crossing my arms over my chest. "Because I love Christmas and I love decorating for Christmas and this makes me happy. Do you have a problem with that?"

"It still doesn't make any sense. We're only going to be here for a couple of days," he says.

"I thought you were leaving."

“Yes, well, I can’t get off the mountain. So, we’re stuck together.”

“You don’t have to be a jerk just because you hate Christmas,” I say, sitting back down and getting back to unwrapping all the ornaments.

“I never said I hated Christmas.”

“Then help me decorate.”

He starts to answer, then his phone rings and he shakes his head and walks off.

Ugh. I can’t believe I was thinking that maybe we could be friends or that I could possibly ignore him. I might have to put a bag over my head. Or maybe I could move the Christmas tree into the middle of the room and make him sit on the other side of it so I can’t see him.

I’ve nearly got the rest of the ornaments unveiled when the one in my hand catches me off guard. It’s a baby’s first Christmas ornament and one that’s clearly several years old. But for whatever reason, holding it brings up all those lost and lonely feelings. All the ones that have been nearly choking me lately. Where I feel like life is passing me by and I’m just staring out the window watching it. And I feel like my hands are tied and my mouth is taped shut and there’s nothing I can do about all the things I’m missing out on.

A sob chokes out of me and I swipe my hand across my eyes to wipe away my tears. But it’s too damn late. I feel his presence before I see him or he says anything. The warmth of another body sitting close to me.

Without a word, he picks me up and cradles me in his lap. He just holds me and lets me cry, which only makes the sobs

come harder and faster. He rocks us gently, rubbing my back and making soothing sounds.

“It shouldn’t be you seeing me like this,” I say.

“What?” he asks.

“You’re my nemesis. You shouldn’t see me at my worst.”

He leans back, wipes a thumb beneath each of my eyes. “Do you really think I’m your nemesis? I thought you had to be a superhero to earn one of those.” His eyes narrow playfully at me. “Do you have a secret identity you’ve been hiding from me?”

“Stop being so nice to me.” I say those words, but I snuggle my head onto his chest, making myself at home in his lap. Like this is where I belong.

“We’ve got a lot to talk about here, baby doll. Can you first tell me why you were crying?”

I open up my palm and show him the ornament.

He plucks it out of my hand and looks at it. “Baby’s first ornament.” He exhales slowly. “I think I’m with you, but break it down for me anyways.”

“I’m feeling sorry for myself,” I say.

“I seriously doubt that.”

“I’m single. I have no prospects on the horizon as far as dating goes. And I want to be a mother. I thought I’d be a mother twice over by now. You can’t throw a rock in Saddle Creek without hitting a pregnant lady.”

“You really shouldn’t throw rocks at pregnant ladies. That’s not nice.”

I smack his chest and give a watery laugh. Then I gasp and look up into his face. “I’m not upset about Savannah or jealous or anything. She deserves Ren and that baby and all that happiness. I’m just sad for me. That’s all. See,” I shrug. “Feeling sorry for myself.”

“That is not what you’re doing, baby doll. You want a baby, I’ll knock you up right now. You on any kind of birth control? I’ll give you a baby.”

I lean back and stare at him, looking for his smile or the punchline to his joke. But he’s completely serious. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I can. Because it’s something you want and I have the power to possibly give it to you. Of course I would do that. I’d do anything for you, Jackie.”

“I’m so confused.”

He leans in and kisses my forehead. “I know. You and I need to have a conversation and I need to clear some things up, because you have some serious misunderstandings about me and how I feel about certain people.”

“Like me?”

“Yeah, like you. And Matt Hardin.”

“His annoying wife is strutting around town with her baby bump too, and that was part of why I had to get out of town because I just couldn’t look at her anymore. I swear to God I wanted to use the wrong toner and accidentally make her hair green.”

“She goes to you for her hair?”

“Of course she does. She wants to rub things in my face. Show off her big diamond and talk about how Matt is now the

vice president at the car dealership.”

Luca snorts. “The car dealership that her daddy owns? Big fucking deal.”

His phone rings again and he pulls it out of his pocket. I see it’s something about Quantico, which I know from television is where the FBI is headquartered.

“You can go deal with that.”

“I’m going to call them back. I want you to go wash your face. I’ll handle the call, then we’re going to talk about all the things.” He holds my chin and stares into my eyes.

chapter **twenty-six**

Luca

By the time I'm off the phone—which takes longer than I wanted—I've got things settled with my job and I'm ready to get things settled between me and Jackie.

It's fucking time.

I step back out into the living area to find her on a stool in front of the Christmas tree. She's already placed the “baby's first Christmas” ornament front and center on the tree.

“You could get down and I could hang the ones that go up higher,” I say.

“No, you talk. You said you had things to tell me. You do that while I do this,” she says.

I go to stand near the tree and yeah, stare at her curves that are perfectly highlighted in those candy striped leggings. Her thick thighs look luscious, and that plump fucking ass looks so bitable.

“Hey! Are you actually staring at my ass right now?”

I lift my eyes to hers. “I stare at your ass whenever I can, baby doll.”

“It’s like I woke up in reverse land.”

“Right, because you believe some lunacy about me not liking you,” I say.

She wiggles a finger at me. “I know that you broke Matt and I up and that you told him I wasn’t good enough for him.”

“Is that what that fucker told you?”

Her brows raise. “Yes, that’s exactly what he told me.”

I shake my head. “No.”

She goes back to hanging some of the smaller, more delicate ornaments at the higher spots on the tree. I stare down at her body as she reaches on her tip toes—even on the stepstool—to reach the top spots.

“What in the actual fuck are you wearing on your feet?” I ask staring at her bow covered socks or whatever they are.

“They’re my Christmas slippers. Now get on with your story.”

“They’re ridiculous.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Goddamn you’re sexy with that mouth, Jackie. That was always the problem. I’m the one that wanted to ask you out first, but Matt beat me to it. You were clearly into him, and I understood. He was the bigger man on campus. I was newer to town. That fucker used to play “Jessie’s Girl” by Rick Springfield every time I got in his car.”

She gasps and spins on the stool. When she does, she loses her balance and wobbles. I grab her legs and pull her off the stool, and she slides down my body. But then she keeps sliding because of those stupid slippers that are apparently not slip-

proof. She looks up at me where her head is now near my stomach area.

“That was super smooth,” she says.

“It’s your stupid, ugly socks.”

She sucks in a breath. “You take it back. I love these.” She tries to move, but clearly her sweater is caught on something. “Oh shit.”

“What’s the matter?”

“My sweater snagged on your zipper, I think.”

Just her talking about my zipper has me semi-hard because I turn into a teenage boy around this woman.

“The easiest thing to do is for me to just shimmy,” she says, all the while doing exactly that—shimmying out of her sweater.

“Oh fuck, don’t do that.”

She stands up, her sweater dangling from the front of my pants. Her full tits are encased in what looks to be a bra spun from candy cane sugar. It’s pink and white, delicate lace with a hint of sparkle, and it is the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

“I just need to get it unhooked now,” she says.

“Your bra?” I ask with a hard swallow.

“No, silly. My sweater.” Then she falls to her knees.

“Fuck, Jackie,” I groan.

“What’s the matter with you?” she asks, looking up at me with those wide brown eyes of hers. The small smattering of freckles that play across her nose and cheeks make her look innocent. It adds to the fantasy.

“What’s the matter? The matter is that all I can think about is you playing peppermint stick with my dick while you’re in that position.” I try to move away from her, but she loops her fingers through my belt loop and tugs me back to her. “I’ll go change out of these jeans, then you can get the sweater.”

She licks her bottom lip. “Play peppermint stick? Explain to me what you mean by that?”

I swallow thickly. “Yesterday, when you were sucking on that candy, and you kept making that popping noise.”

“Yes, and I was annoying you.”

I shake my head. “Not annoying, baby doll, driving crazy. You were making me so fucking hard I thought I was losing my mind.”

Her lips part and then her eyes drop to my jeans button and zipper. She bites down on her bottom lip and unfastens my button.

“So Matt knew you wanted me?” she asks when she reaches my zipper.

“Yeah, that fucker knew. He flaunted you in my face. But you were happy so that’s all that mattered.”

She yanks my jeans down my hips and the heavy jut of my erection tenting my boxer briefs is obscene. Her palms slide up my thighs.

“What changed then? Because you never made a move yourself. So you broke us up just to be spiteful?” she asks, one hand squeezing my dick from outside my shorts. Again, she looks up at me.

“No, of course not.”

Her nails pluck at the waistband of my underwear and she pulls them down, sliding them to meet my jeans pooled at my feet.

Now she's eye level with my hard, heavy erection that is weeping just for her.

She grabs my dick, holding it in place as she licks up the underside. "Then what happened?"

"Goddammit, Jackie," I hiss. "I caught him cheating. He was nailing Sophie under the football stands, and I told him he needed to end things with you or I'd tell you the truth."

"You never told him I wasn't good enough for him?"

"The opposite, baby, I told him he'd never deserved you."

Her lips close over the head of my dick and she sucks hard.

"Fuck. That's it. Suck me hard, then release me with a pop like you did that candy."

Her eyes tilt up to me as she slides back. Pop.

"Sexiest woman alive. Are you going to let me fuck you?"

"I figured this morning when you didn't come too that you were just going through the motions for me, just pleasuring me."

"Because I'm such a nice fucking guy? No," I shake my head. "No, I wanted to come inside your pussy. I was being selfish. I'll wear a condom if you want me to."

She shakes her head. Then she sucks my dick back into her mouth. Her tongue works me as her cheeks go hollow.

"Goddammit, Jackie, it's like you're sucking out my soul. So fucking good. I knew this sassy mouth of yours would undo me. Do I taste as good as that candy?"

She releases me with a pop. “Better,” she says, with a heavy breath. “Can we go to the bed and get naked now?”

I kick off my pants and boxers and pick her up, then carry her to the bedroom where we slept tangled up in each other the night before.

When we get to the bedroom, I set her down and instruct her to remove the rest of her clothes.

“If I try to take those leggings off of you, I’ll tear them apart with my teeth.”

I’m momentarily dumbstruck by the sight of her bare tits. I felt one of them this morning but didn’t get to see it. They’re heavy, teardrop shaped with large, dark areolas. Her nipples are like bullets; hard, stiff points.

“I could spend hours just on your tits, baby doll. But right now, I need to lick that pussy.” I squeeze my cock.

Jackie pulls those tight leggings down her shapely legs, revealing her smooth skin. She’s a shade or two darker than I am. Her Mexican-American heritage giving her a natural tan where I’m just pale. Together our skin is a study in contrasts, and it just makes me harder.

She lays back on the bed, then opens her thighs to give me a peek. She’s completely waxed, her pussy bare and glistening.

The scent of her arousal is driving me wild. I wedge my shoulders between her thighs and inhale deeply. I lift up her bottom and bring her center closer to me.

I run my nose up that narrow line where her pelvis meets her thigh. “Fuck, you smell so good.”

She whimpers. “Please, Luca.”

I slide two fingers inside her tight pussy, and she grips them so damn tightly. I curve my fingers and find that rough spot on the front wall of her pussy and rub across it.

She makes a moaning sound in the back of her throat. “Yes, right there.” She tries to reach down to touch her clit and I grab her hand.

“You may touch your tits or my head. That’s it. Got it?”

“Yes, I got it.”

She bucks her hips as if to remind me what I was doing. Then her hands go to her tits, cupping them both. Her fingers pinch her nipples.

I lean forward and swirl my tongue over her clit.

“Please, Luca.”

I suck her clit into my mouth. Her tangy sweet taste bursts in my mouth. I finger fuck her and flick my tongue against her clit, making sure not to deviate from my rhythm.

She’s writhing and rocking her pussy against my mouth. One of her hands falls to my head, her fingers threading through my hair. “Luca, yes, yes.”

Then her body tightens, and her climax detonates. A surge of fresh wetness coats my tongue. I lick her through every last tremor of her orgasm.

chapter **twenty-seven**

Jackie

I think all of the molecules in my brain are reorganizing themselves and I might be momentarily paralyzed. He crawls up my body. “You ever tasted yourself?” he asks.

I shake my head.

He kisses me, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, and I taste a mixture of him and me. It’s so sexy, it’s stupid. And I was his ‘Jessie’s Girl.’

I grab his ass and hike my legs up around his hips. The heavy weight of his hard cock lays against my wet core and I don’t think it would take much to get him inside. At least the tip of him. He’s big enough that it’ll take some effort to get the rest of him in there.

“Fuck me. Please.”

“You want me to fuck you?” he asks, his words mostly growl.

If I’m honest, I want more than that. More than this random hookup at this cabin. But it’s what he’s offering, and I know it’s all I can have. I mean our lives don’t even make

sense together anyways. He's a big hotshot FBI agent in Oklahoma somewhere and I live in Podunk Saddle Creek.

So despite the fact that spending this time with him has made me realize that I want Luca Daniels to be mine, I want him to love me and I want to love him in return, I know that's not what this is about.

"Yes, fuck me," I say. I keep my eyes closed so he can't see any of the emotion clogged there.

"You didn't get enough when I ate you just now?"

I shake my head.

He licks my throat, then nibbles along my collarbone. "I need you to understand something, baby doll. Once I fuck this pussy," he reaches between us and cups me. It's crude and possessive and it lights me up like a proverbial Christmas tree. "Once I slide my dick inside, this pussy belongs to me."

I gasp at his filthy words, and I stare up at his blue—now dark sapphire—eyes.

"All this slick for me, Jackie?"

How has he gotten even hotter in the last three minutes? I nod. Because I don't want him to change his mind, I lock my heels behind his back and pull him closer to my body.

"Yes, it all belongs to you, Luca. Only you," I say. Because it's the damn truth. Every time I make myself come, it's his face I see. Every hero that pledges his undying love to a heroine in a book, it's Luca's voice I hear.

"Tell me who this pussy belongs to," he says as he lines up the fat head of his cock at my entrance.

"You. It belongs to you."

He thrusts inside in one quick movement that has me stretching so wide to fit around him. “Fucking right it does.” he says. His head falls into the crook of my shoulder, his hot breath fluttering against my skin. “Goddamn, baby doll, I’ve never fucked bare. You feel so perfect. So good.”

I have to squeeze my eyes shut and put my lips to his skin so I don’t bare my soul and share all my secrets. Because the feeling of him filling me up is so intense, so intimate, that I’m forcing myself to not say the words. To not tell him how crazy I am about him.

“I want you to come all over my cock,” he says as he starts to fuck me. “I want this pussy to squeeze me so tight.”

Luca shifts our positions so he’s up on his knees, he pulls one of my legs up so it’s straight and leaning against his shoulder. His dick slides in even deeper while he grips my hips.

“You have no idea how many fantasies I’ve had about your body, Jackie,” he says. One of his hands goes to my mound. But he doesn’t touch my clit. He slides in, slow and deep. Like he has all night to fuck me and he’s not in a hurry at all to come.

His thumb circles above the hood of my clit, not making direct contact.

“I need more,” I say. And no statement has ever been more true. I need more pressure, more direct contact. I need more of him in this moment and in my life.

“You need to come again?” he asks.

I nod, nearly sobbing with want.

He slides his thumb next to my clit as he thrusts in and out of me. “So goddamn tight, so wet. I’m gonna fill this pussy

with my come, paint your insides with my seed, baby doll. That what you want?”

His words push me over the edge and my body breaks into a million pieces as the orgasm rocks through me. “Luca!”

“Christ, your pussy is squeezing my cock to death,” he growls. “I’m coming.” Then his hot release pulses inside me. “Better than any fantasy I ever could have conjured, baby doll.” He kisses me, kisses my throat.

When he’s done and he’s cleaned us both up, he crawls inside the covers and pulls me tightly to him. “We need to stay warm. Though I did see that the temperatures are going to raise tomorrow so the roads should start to clear.”

He kisses my neck and my shoulder.

“Guess we can tell Ren and Savannah that their little hookup plan worked,” he says, his voice sleepy.

I force out a chuckle. “Yeah, I guess we can.”

I lay there in the silence after our passionate love making and listen as his breath slows and evens out.

Oh fuck. I’m in love with him.

How did I not realize that I’ve been in love with this man? The way he gave his sister their grandmother’s house—his inheritance—just signed it over to her? The way he supported Savannah’s light speed romance to his former subordinate and fellow FBI agent, Ren and walked her down the aisle in their wedding. The way he offered to knock me up because I cried about not being a mother yet.

What the hell do I do now? Luca is obviously attracted to me. But that was all just sex. There’s no way this man has

been hiding some secret, passionate love for me all these years.

So what do I do?

I need to play it cool. He wants just sex, which now that I realize I'm the idiot in love with him, I can't actually do again. I can't let him use my body for release knowing it's more for me than it is him. I mean when I was blissfully ignorant of my own feelings, that was one thing. But this... loving him.

I exhale slowly. I just need to fake things long enough to get out of the cabin.

chapter **twenty-eight**

Luca

I wake up with a big ass smile on my face until I realize I'm naked, but alone. I get up, pull on sweatpants and go out into the living room where I find Jackie packing up her stuff in the kitchen.

I stare at her for a minute, watching her efficient movements. She hasn't seen me yet, hasn't noticed my presence.

But then Mabel barks and comes trotting over to me, tail wagging.

Jackie looks over at me, her dark eyes take in my bare torso and then she forces herself to look away.

I squat to scratch Mabel between the ears. "That's my good girl." Then I walk over to Jackie, pick her up and set her on the island counter. "What are you doing, baby doll?"

"Packing," she says, brightly. She smiles at me, but her eyes never quite reach my face. "Snow's been melting. I called the highway patrol and they said the roads are cleared. So I thought I'd head home to make sure I made it by Christmas. Roni will be heartbroken if I'm not there in time."

“Were you planning to wake me up and say goodbye?”

“I hadn’t really gotten that far. Plus, you seemed really tired.”

I grab her chin and still her head. “Look at me, Jackie.”

She looks at my face, but her eyes are focused in on my nose or my eyebrows? I’m not even sure.

“Eyes. Stop hiding from me. What the fuck is going on right now? Did last night mean nothing to you? Because I thought you made some promises.”

She releases a little huff. “People say stuff they don’t mean all the time when they’re in the throes of passion. We both did that. I’m not going to hold you to anything. It’s okay, Luca.” Finally, her eyes reach mine. “I know it was a one-time thing. I get it. Your life is here in Oklahoma with the FBI and mine is back home in Saddle Creek. So let’s just end things now before things get complicated.”

“Oh, no. Things are already so fucking complicated.”

She shakes her head. “They’re not. I promise.” Her tears tell a different story.

I thumb them away.

“Well, here’s the problem. As it turns out, I no longer work for the FBI and I need a place to live because I’m not staying in Oklahoma on purpose.” I spread her thighs wider so I can stand between them, get closer to her.

She’s wearing another pair of Christmas leggings; these are black with brightly colored light bulbs all over them. Her sweatshirt declares in bold red lettering: I just want to bake cookies and watch Christmas movies.

I slide my hands up to the juncture of her thighs, letting my thumbs rest so close to her pussy. I tap her with my thumbs.

“Did we talk about this pussy last night?”

She swallows visibly. “Yes.”

“Do you let just any man who wants to lay claim to it? Because I thought I was special.”

She looks at me and swallows. Then she tries to look away, but I turn her chin so she has to face me.

“Please answer,” I say.

“No other man. You’ve ruined me for other men.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“So whose pussy is this?” I ask her.

“It’s yours, Luca.”

“But yet you think last night was a one-time thing?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know what you want me to say right now,” she says, her voice soft.

“Tell me what you want, Jackie.”

“I want you. I want us to be together. But that doesn’t make any sense. Up until yesterday I didn’t even think you liked me. So it doesn’t matter if I’m in love with you, Luca. I’ll go back home, and we can pretend none of this ever happened.”

“The fuck we can. I laid claim to you last night after wanting you for most of my adult life. I’m not letting you go ever again.” I cup her face and look into her eyes. “I’m so fucking in love with you, it makes me crazy, Jackie Cuevas.

Do you hear me? So yes, I broke you and Matt up. And when I heard that he had been sniffing around you again, I came down there and paid him another visit.”

She sucks in a breath. “You knew about that?”

“That he hit on you after he married Sophie? Fuck yes, I knew.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” she asks.

“Because I’m a goddamn idiot. But I’m done making that mistake. I’m not waiting another minute. I’m going to make some arrangements, and then will you go somewhere with me?”

“Where?”

“Vegas. I need to wife you up, baby doll, before you come to your senses and realize what an asshole I am.”

She laughs and wraps her arms around me. “Do you know that I fell into an entire subgenre of books because of my obsession with you? It’s like my heart knew somehow before my mind figured out.”

“Oh yeah, what kind of books?”

“Bully romance.”

“Am I your bully?”

“No. But they really aren’t either. I mean sometimes they can be mean initially. But usually it’s for a good reason. Like this one.”

“Because you’re my ‘Jessie’s Girl?’”

“Yeah, because that.”

“Fuck, I love you, Jackie.”

“I love you too, Luca.”

She kisses me then. And we let our tongues do the talking. We kiss and kiss until we’re both panting. Then she slides off the countertop and turns around, bending herself over the island.

“That an invitation, baby doll?”

“You offered to knock me up so we might as well get started. I guess I should have told you last night that I’m not on anything. I haven’t been sexually active since high school and that was hardly worth remembering. So, I haven’t needed any protection.”

“You want me to put my baby in your belly?” I tear my sweatpants down, then yank on her leggings. I barely get her panties down past her seam before I’m slamming inside of her.

“Yes, put a baby in me with your big dick.”

“Going to marry you tonight, Jackie. Then I’m going to fuck you again and again.” I pump into her with each word as if I’m saying my vows right now. Crude, maybe, but I mean them. This woman is my entire world.

“I’m going to come, yeah, just like that.” She pushes back against me and then her pussy convulses around me, pulling out my own orgasm as I follow her over the edge.

I don’t know if this is the one to get her pregnant, but I’ll put my baby inside her if it’s the last thing I do.

epilogue

Jackie

A few months later...

As it turns out getting pregnant didn't happen immediately. Even though I'm closer to thirty than I am to twenty-five, my doctor wants us to try on our own for more than six months before they do any kind of medical interference since all of mine and Luca's tests came back normal. Theoretically I should be able to get pregnant just fine. I just haven't.

Whatever. I'm trying not to obsess.

In the meantime, I get to hold my niece whenever I want like I'm doing now in the salon in between my clients.

"It's ridiculous how beautiful you are," I tell her. I kiss her sweet little head and inhale her perfect baby smell.

"I literally think I could nap standing at the shampoo bowl," Savannah says.

"I bet you could. Do you want me to take your next one? I don't mind."

“No, it’s time for me to get back to my regular schedule. I’m lucky I get to work while I wear her or have her sleep in the portable crib. And her daddy is coming to get her early today.”

The bell rings and instead of Ren, it’s Luca that strolls through the door. This many months later and the sight of that man walking determinedly towards me still gives me butterflies.

He kisses my forehead and then his niece’s. “Look at these beautiful girls.” Then he glances at Savannah. “Hey, sis.”

“Yeah whatever. I know I’m not the most important girl in your life anymore.” She wags two fingers between us. “I’m still taking credit for this.”

“Even though it was like ten years in the making?” he asks.

“Yep,” she says.

“Fair enough. I’m not arguing with you.” He kneels next to where I’m sitting, then holds up a gift bag. “I brought you a present.”

I gasp. “You did?” I’m not even gonna pretend otherwise; I love presents. And ones from the man I love are extra special.

He reaches down and cradles Aubrey, our niece, and takes her out of my arms, then hands me the gift bag. “The packages are numbered, and you have to open them in order.”

Savannah comes over to stand next to me. “What did you do, big brother? When did you get to be so creative?”

I pull out the first wrapped box and scrape at the tape with my fingernail. I’ve almost got the wrapping paper off the box

before I realize it's Christmas paper. Probably the only one he could find.

I look up at him. "You're adorable and I love you," I say.

He grins at me and nods towards the box. "Open it, baby doll."

I pull the lid open and find a ceramic disc painted with the words, 'baby's first Christmas.' My eyes sting as they fill with tears. He takes the ornament from me and then hands me one of the other wrapped boxes.

"Now, this one," he says.

I unwrap it to find a standard drug-store pregnancy test. I look up at him confused.

He reaches up and cups my cheek. "Your period is late. You've been more emotional than usual and the last two days your nipples have been super sensitive. Jackie, I think you're pregnant."

"My period is late?"

"TMI on the nipple talk, big brother," Savannah says. She takes Aubrey, rocking her from side to side as she stands. Then she nods to me. "He's not wrong though. Go pee on that stick."

I stare at them and give them a watery laugh. "What's in the other boxes?"

"Different kinds of tests in case you didn't like this one," he says. He points to the bathroom. "Go."

"I'm going." I slip into the bathroom and do my business then holler through the door, "set a timer for three minutes." Then I walk out because I can't stay in there and just wait for the test. I've done that one too many times. Stared at it and

wished for there to be a line or a plus sign. Sometimes it feels a bit like reading tea leaves.

Luca pulls me into his arms when I reach him. “No matter what, you’re the love of my life. Do you understand that?”

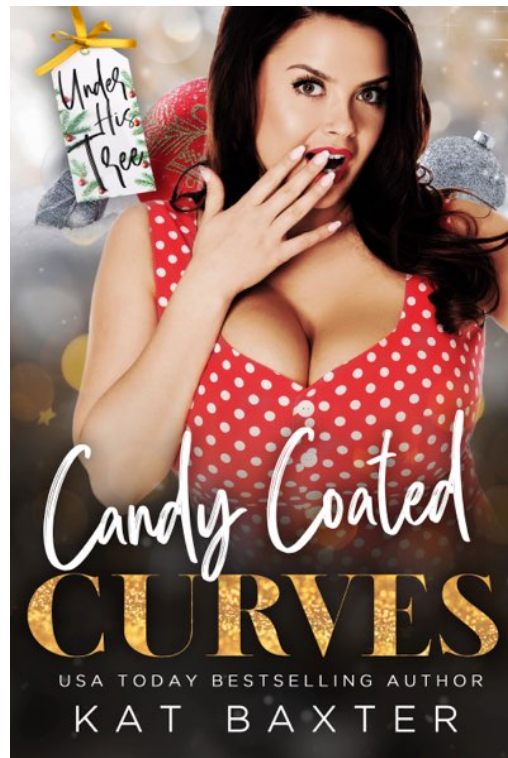
I nod into his chest. “I love you too.”

“But I really think we did it this time. If not, we’ll save that ornament for when we do have that first kiddo.”

This man. I put my arms around his neck and kiss him. He lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist and we kiss deeper. Somewhere in the distance, I hear a beeping and then Savannah screams.

“You’re pregnant!”

candy coated curves



AN AGE-GAP/HUSKY hero/Curvy girl romance

Roni

He's older than me. He's my boss. And I'm secretly in love with him.

Nash Lloyd is as delicious as the candy confections he creates in his sweet shop. He's friendly to everyone that steps

into the store, but keeps me at a distance. I can't help but stare at his big, burly body all day long.

So when the opportunity comes for him to play my fake boyfriend, I jump at the chance. I'll take pretend kisses from him. For now. If I'm a very good girl, maybe I'll get what I really want for Christmas: real kisses and so much more...

chapter **twenty-nine**

NASH

I've never given much thought to the belief in past lives. Pretty sure if you'd asked me, I'd have told you it was a bunch of bullshit.

Still, everything about Veronica Cuevas makes me second guess that belief.

Now I'm wondering if maybe I wasn't a giant asshole in a past life and sweet, gorgeous, curvy as fuck Roni is my punishment.

Why? You might be asking. Well, I'll tell you. I can make you a list actually.

Number one, I'm old enough to be her father. I mean I would have been a teen dad, but still. Too damn old to be looking at her and thinking the filthy things I think.

Number two, aside from our ages, she's still out of my league. Yeah, I guess by many standards she's considered plus size, but she's voluptuous and luscious. Meanwhile, I'm just a huge fucking beast. Big all over, massive shoulders, massive thighs, belly. I'm just a big motherfucker.

Finally, she works for me at my candy shop. So technically I'm her boss.

So yeah, she's one hundred percent off limits.

I've practically lived like a goddamn monk since I met her, eighteen months ago. Haven't touched my dick since. I don't know... something about not wanting to come unless I'm inside her.

Even that feels wrong for all the aforementioned reasons. Plus, I don't know—I don't think she looks at me that way. Sometimes it seems like she does, but then I watch her with the customers and I think maybe she's just a flirt.

Even if she doesn't want me, I can't stop thinking about her. Even now, while I'm out on a Friday night with my friend, Ian, sitting here, throwing back a few beers, talking shit about people. I'm still watching her. Because, of course, she's here with some friends.

They're currently out on the dance floor, doing some silly line dance. It's hard not to watch every bounce and wiggle of Roni's lush curves as she moves. She's giggling her head off and looking like a goddamn miracle. The fact that she's wearing a reindeer antler headband with jingle bells and tinsel does not escape my attention. It shouldn't be sexy, but she would be sexy wearing a roll of aluminum foil.

"When are you going to finally make a move on that?" Ian asks.

"Move on what?" I ask.

He glares at me. "Come on. I'm too old for this shit. Just answer my fucking question."

I shake my head and take a swig of my beer. It's lukewarm at this point, but I still swallow it down. Lukewarm and bitter

is just about right for this evening. Because, yeah, I know exactly what he's talking about. "I'm not making a move on her. Just keeping an eye on her. She works for me." I shrug. "I'm protective."

Ian tips his head back and guffaws. "Oh, protective. Is that what the kids are calling it now?"

"Fuck off."

"Suit yourself."

A college boy joins them on the dance floor. I know it's a college kid home for the holidays because they all look the same; khaki pants and striped, collared shirts. I don't recognize him off the top of my head, but I probably know his parents.

Despite the fact that my girl is dancing in a group of other women, of course he zeroes in on her. He's trying to talk to her, but she points at the speakers and then her ears. Doesn't make him move away though. Nope, he just keeps sorta dancing next to her, though of course the fucker doesn't really know any of the right steps. He's just mostly staring at her curves, namely at her fucking tits.

I shift in my seat.

"What did you think of her new ink?" Ian asks.

I shoot a glare at him. Ian co-owns the local tattoo parlor, *the Needle Bards*, with his younger brother, Zane. So, he could be telling the truth, but I can't quite tell.

His brows raise so high they nearly disappear into his hairline. "She didn't show you?"

I narrow my gaze at him.

He grins. “A real pretty tat of a pomegranate on her shoulder.”

“You better be lying to me right now,” I say, my words come out through my teeth, my hands tight fists on the top of the table.

Ian holds his hands up in surrender. “Listen, I’ve inked her a couple of times. It’s my job, Nash, so settle the fuck down.”

“You’ve touched her.”

“Kinda hard not to when you’re doing a tat,” he says with a shrug. But he’s got this smirk on his face that says he’s internally laughing his ass off. “So yeah, I’ve touched her plenty.”

I want to get out of the chair and beat the shit out of him. Intellectually, I know that being an ink slinger is Ian’s job, along with his younger brother, Zane. They’re good at their work. Professional, even. I know my buddy is just trying to piss me off.

It’s totally working.

Still. I don’t like the idea of him or anyone else putting their hands on my girl. Even though she’s not actually mine.

“Where?” I ask. Because evidently I’m a glutton for punishment.

“Ribcage, hip, shoulder—” He takes a breath like he’s going to keep going on, but I shake my head.

“Enough. I can’t listen to any more of that.”

“You’re getting on my fucking nerves,” Ian says tossing his hands up. “What are you even waiting on?”

“I’m too goddamn old for her.”

“Oh, bullshit.”

“There are men our age all over this town that marry girls that young. Look at the oldest Crawford brother. He just saddled himself with a chick younger than Roni.” He nods to the dance floor. “In fact, pretty sure that’s who your girl is out there dancing with.”

I look out there and Ian’s not wrong. That is Amber Crawford. She did marry the oldest Crawford brother and she is young. A couple years younger than Roni’s twenty-three.

There’s something about Amber that doesn’t seem that young. She’s just one of those old souls. Roni’s not like that. Roni is young and vibrant. Playful. Sassy. So fucking sexy.

My balls ache all the fucking time. It’s a wonder they haven’t actually broken off my body. I should probably call the doctor because I bet I’m a medical miracle at this point.

“I can practically hear the wheels in your head turning from over here.” He drains his beer. “All I’m saying is you clearly want her. It’s obvious she wants you. So, this bullshit dance that you’re too old for her that you’re playing at makes no sense.”

“What do you mean? It’s obvious she wants me?” I ask, and I know I sound like an eager son of bitch, but I can’t help it.

“Oh, please. I’ve seen the way she looks at you, brother. She wants you.”

I shake my head. “You’re imagining that. I’m a fat, ugly motherfucker.”

“Well, whatever. I don’t know. I just know what I’ve seen when that girl looks at you. Plus, when she’s been into my shop, she talks about you.”

I wave off my friend. “She just talks about me because she knows you and I are friends.”

“I don’t think that’s it.”

“But you know even if she has developed some misguided crush on me—which I still maintain that she hasn’t—I’m too old and ugly for her. She’s too perfect.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” Ian says, his jaw clenches as he says it and I know exactly who he’s thinking about. We don’t say her name anymore. Brings up too much pain.

The song ends and Roni and Amber and whoever else they’re with make their way over to the bar to get more drinks. Stupid frat boy follows.

“Uh-oh, looks like somebody’s making a move,” Ian says. “Maybe you waited too long, old man.”

I watch as that college boy puts his fucking hands on her.

I’m pretty sure I nearly stop breathing as I force myself to sit and do nothing. He’s closer to her age. Despite the fact that he looks like an utter tool, it’s her choice if he gets to touch her.

She laughs and skirts away from him shaking her head in a no and obviously forcing a laugh.

He steps closer again and once more puts a hand on her wrist.

Oh, fuck no.

chapter **thirty**

Roni

Despite the fact that it's technically winter here in Texas and is actually below seventy degrees outside, it's hot inside Ace's. Probably because I've been dancing and shaking my booty. Doing anything and everything I can think of to get a certain someone's attention.

Nash rarely comes out on Saturday nights. On any normal Saturday night, the best I hoped for when I was getting dressed was the chance to spend a fun night with some girlfriends.

Except, Nash is here. And I can feel his eyes on me. Watching me.

When we're at work, in his candy shop, The Candy Jar, there are days he barely seems to notice me. I get only the occasional, furtive look from him. He is far too good a man to leer openly at an employee.

But here? Away from the shop? On neutral ground, where he thinks I won't notice? Here, I can feel his gaze on me.

So, do you blame me for relishing how that feels? For shaking my ass with a little extra sass, since I know I'm the focus of his attention?

How could I not?

I am not, however, enjoying the attention from Pete. He's a guy that maybe I went to high school with. He says he's a few years younger than me and that he was only here occasionally. Whatever that means. But he is all up in my business tonight and I am so not interested. For a variety of reasons. Most of which is the fact that I am already in love with someone else.

"He's been watching you the whole time," my friend, Amber, says quietly.

I don't bother looking over my shoulder; I know who she's talking about. He's the main reason we're here on our girls' night and not back at my house—the one I share with my older sister, Jackie—watching chick flicks and eating ice cream straight out of the tubs. When I overheard Nash making plans to meet his friend, Ian, here, I roped my friend into coming to Ace's with me, so Nash can see me wiggle my goods and Amber can help me make a plan of attack.

Not too long ago, Amber was in a similar situation. She worked for the man she was in love with. He's older than her, but clearly felt the same and so tonight she's here to see if she thinks Nash reciprocates my feelings.

"It's definitely working," she says. Then her eyes snag on the guy that joined us on the dance floor and she gives a huff of exasperation. "Maybe a little too well."

"At the moment he seems occupied," I say, hoping the blonde that Pete, as he introduced himself by screaming in my ear, invites him to dance or just go home with her.

Amber glances over at the guy and nods. She grabs my hand and pulls me away. "Let's get some water and cool off."

“Maybe Nash looked at me, but probably just because he’s being protective. Being in love with my older boss makes me a fool.” I bang my head lightly on the bar. “I’m going to die a virgin.”

“No, you’re not,” Amber says with a chuckle. “You just need to take matters into your own hands. “That’s what I had to do. Sometimes good guys like that need a push.”

“What am I supposed to do? Go to work on Monday, grab the front of his jeans and be like, ‘give me this dick because I’m tired of being a virgin’?”

Amber and I both dissolve into a fit of the giggles and then Pete is there again putting his hand on my shoulder. He gives it a squeeze that feels more like a grope.

“Hey, I’ll pop that cherry for you.”

I remove his hand from me and try to laugh it off, stepping around to put Amber in between us. She can handle him. And also, her husband, Quinn Crawford, is huge and will kill any man who puts hands on her.

“Gross,” Amber says.

Pete just laughs and walks back around to be next to me. “Come on, babe, it’s mostly a joke.” He encircles my wrist with his hand.

That’s when a large shadow falls over us.

“You girls ready to go?” Nash asks, his voice coming out in a tight growl. He glares so hard at Pete the guy drops my wrist and steps away. Nash looks ready to snap Pete in half and he’s big enough to do it.

My cheeks heat and despite my Hispanic blood, I’m pretty sure they turn bright pink. I can’t help but wonder how much

of my conversation Nash heard. Did he hear me admit to being a virgin? Did he hear stupid Pete offer to relieve me of my cherry?

Gross.

“Come on now, I’ll take y’all home.”

Could I convince Nash to be the one to take my cherry? Everything I have belongs to him anyways. At least in my heart it does.



chapter **thirty-one**

NASH

I spread the peanut butter fudge across the marble slab with my paddle. Aside from the classic fudge, this is our best seller. It's my Granny's recipe and all I can think about is eating it off of Roni's plump little body. I'm a pervy son of a bitch.

She's looking sweet and fresh today in some festive leggings that cling to her short curvy legs. Every time she leans over the counter, I can see the way those leggings mold to her pussy. It's probably my imagination, but I swear I can see the outline of things down below. So here I am, spreading fudge the way I've done every day of my life for the last two decades and I'm as hard as this marble slab.

The over-the-door bell rings and in walks that college fucker from the night before. He's wearing another collared shirt, but with a pair of blue jeans this time. His eyes zero in on Roni immediately and he grins brightly.

"There you are!" he says. "I was told I could find you here."

She looks up at his voice and kinda gives a little hop backwards. "Pete," she says. "Uh, why were you looking for me?"

He chuckles. “Because, we didn’t get to finish our conversation last night.”

She glances over her shoulder at me, then back at him. “Well, I’m at work, so now’s not really a good time.”

“Oh, you need me to buy something. No problem, babe, I got you covered. Don’t want you to get in trouble with your boss.” He looks down into the glass display case at all the fudge flavors available and the other confections we offer. There are also old-fashioned whiskey barrels behind him filled with hard candies. But he smiles and points at something on the bottom shelf. “Cherries.”

“Yes?” she asks.

“Chocolate-covered cherries. I bet those are so sweet and ripe.”

Give me a fucking break. I *accidentally* bang the paddle on the marble.

Roni lifts her chin a little. “We usually sell them by the pound or individually.”

“Why don’t you let me take you to dinner, then afterwards we will talk all about those cherries?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t date customers. Besides, I already have a boyfriend.”

He laughs. “Oh sure, that’s convenient.” He leans against the glass, getting his goddamn fingerprints all over my display case. “You didn’t mention a boyfriend last night.”

And I am so done with this scrawny son of a bitch. I pull off my gloves, not giving a shit if walking away now ruins this batch of fudge; I’ll make more later.

“What’s the problem?” I ask, stepping right next to Roni.

She visibly relaxes into my presence, nearly sagging against me, and something inside me blooms. She makes me feel like a king sometimes. Like I'm the most powerful man in the world, at least in her world.

Pete, the ass, looks up at me. "I'm just talking to Roni here. Don't see how it's your business."

"Well, the Candy Jar is my business so anything that happens inside of it is as well."

"I wanted to buy some cherries and Roni was refusing," Pete tosses out.

Which is not at all what happened. Fuck. "Roni reserves the right to refuse customers if they're being obnoxious and disrespectful."

Pete snorts. "What are you, her dad?"

"Actually no," I say, then I wrap an arm around Roni and pull her snug to my side. "I'm her boyfriend."

She looks up at me and grins. Then one of her small hands runs up my torso then back down stopping just shy of my belt." Sometimes I like to call him 'daddy,'" she says in her sassiest voice.

"That's fucking disgusting," Pete snaps. Then he looks at Roni. "No wonder you're still a virgin if this is who you're going home with." Then he turns on his heels and leaves.

Roni's fingers curl into my plaid shirt, right at my belly and I feel like an idiot for wanting to suck in my gut. It's not like I can hide my stomach from her. She knows what I look like.

And really all I'm thinking about is the fact that this girl's hands are on me and she's a virgin. I have to get some physical

space between us before I do something we both regret. I grab her hand and remove it from my body, then take three steps backwards.

“Is what he said true?” I ask.

She swallows and nods.

“Nothing to be ashamed about, Roni, you hear me?”

“Thanks for coming over to help. He kinda gives me the creeps.”

I rub at the back of my head. “Yeah, about that. Only problem is now everyone is gonna think we’re a couple.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I finally recognized who he is. That’s Janice McClay’s nephew which is why I didn’t think of his name right away. He only spent a year or two here. But his aunt—”

“Is the biggest gossip in town,” Roni fills in.

“Yep,” I say.

“Would it be so bad for everyone in town to think we’re dating?” she asks.

Fuck no. I wish I could claim her in front of the whole goddamn town. But she deserves so much better than an ugly old bastard like me.

She chuckles, puts a hand on my arm. “Nash, are you okay? You look a little terrified.”

“You don’t know what you’re getting into. Playing pretend is a dangerous game.”

“Have you pretended to date a lot of women in town?” she asks.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” What I really mean is that everyone will know I’m not pretending anything, that I’m head over ass in love with this woman. Instead I say, “No one is going to believe you and I are actually dating for real.”

She shoots me a glare and pops her fists on her hips. Goddamn she’s delicious. “You think you’re too good for me? You think, because you’re a successful businessman and I’m just some Latina who couldn’t cut it at college, that we don’t belong together?”

I’m already shaking my head. That fiery temper of hers makes me smile. “No, because you’re gorgeous and I’m an old fart.”

She laughs. “Oh my God, you are so ridiculous. You are not an old fart. Don’t you know that silver foxes are in?”

She takes a step closer to me, reaches up and touches my beard, then brushes the hair over my ear.

“The hints of grey and silver in your hair are stupid hot. There’s nothing about you that’s old fart. You’re a sexy beast, Nash.”

“A sexy beast?” I repeat.

“Oh yeah. At least I think so.”

“Roni, you’re playing with fire right now and you need to step back.”

Her lips part and a small gasp falls from them. I want nothing more than to crowd my big body into her and kiss her like my life depends on it. Her phone rings, breaking the spell, and I’m able to walk away. I go back to my fudge to check on how things are, and remarkably, I had gotten to a place in the process where it’s just hardened. It’s not as pretty as it normally is, but it’ll still taste the same. We can actually sell

this batch to Sprinkles, the ice cream shop down the street, and they can heat and serve it on their sundaes.

“What?” Roni says into the phone. “Are you serious? What is wrong with him? I mean surely there’s someone else he could chase around on break.” She sighs. “Yeah, thanks for the heads up.” She hangs up and slides the phone into the pocket on the side of her leggings, which I hadn’t noticed until now.

“Your leggings have pockets?” I ask, like a complete dumb ass.

She spins around to face me. “Some do.”

I nod to the pocket. “What was the call?”

She blows out a breath. “That was Harper Rhodes, dang it, I mean Crawford. Can’t get used to the fact that she and Johnny got married already. Anyways, she’s working in her family’s shop today, and evidently Pete went down there and met some of his buddies and she overheard them talking.”

“About you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be your fake boyfriend whenever he’s around. Next time you want to go out dancing and to shake your ass around like that, you call me, and I’ll come with you. I’ll keep an eye on you. Keep you safe.”

She nods. “It’ll just be until Pete goes back to Texas Tech at the end of Christmas break.”

I nod because I don’t know what else to say. What I want to do is walk down to that ice cream shop, find Pete, and break his fucking neck. But technically he hasn’t done anything wrong. He’s just being a creep.

“I bet if we go out to Jingle Farm’s Christmas Market tomorrow and walk through the fairgrounds holding hands, that’ll solve everything. Then he’ll leave me alone.”

But maybe by then I won’t be able to. God help me.

“I don’t think it’s quite that simple,” I say.

“Just you wait. We’re going to be the cutest couple in that whole Christmas market.”

chapter **thirty-two**

Roni

I thought we'd made plans, but evidently I'm some kind of an idiot. Either that or Nash has a broken neck somewhere. In this case, I'm hoping I'm just an idiot.

Still, I'm bummed that my plan didn't work.

ME: Fake boyfriend is a no-go. He didn't show up to get me.

AMBER: Because he's already here.

ME: Where?

AMBER: The Christmas Market. He's here with Ian and that whole group of guys.

ME: #sigh

ME: <sad face emoji>

AMBER: None of that. We do not give up that easily. You need to just get your sweet ass down here. Give me a second and I'm going to video call you.

A minute later my phone rings and I slide to answer. Amber's face comes into view and she gives me a sassy smile. "Okay, I've gone somewhere more private so we can discuss the next phase of your plan. It's the naked phase."

"I beg your pardon? Did you say naked?"

"Absolutely. So, I know I've hinted at what I did to seduce Quinn and change our relationship from boss and employee to him pulling his head out of his ass and acknowledging that he was in love with me."

"I feel like we're about to cross a line in our friendship," I say, then take a deep cleansing breath. "Okay, I'm ready."

"You're so silly. I'm not getting naked with you, Roni." Amber laughs.

I laugh too, folding my legs up to sit crisscross on my bed.

"So I tried the whole dressing seductively to get his attention, and it did, but not enough for him to cross that line. I knew I had to take more drastic measures because I felt like I was running out of time, especially since that cow, Eileen Perry, was actively trying to sink her claws into Quinn."

"Eww," I say. "She's so not nice. And her son is horrid. He pockets candy every time he comes into the store. It's gotten to where Nash will stop what he's doing and just follow the kid around."

Amber laugh-snorts. "I love that so much. Nash is great."

"Tell me about it."

"Okay, so let's plan your naked phase!" Amber says with a snap of her fingers.

"Finish your story first."

“Well, I got his attention enough that I knew he wanted me too. Just like we know that about Nash, after you shaking your booty at Ace’s the other night. He couldn’t keep his eyes off of you. Obviously he’s willing to step in if he’s offering to be your fake boyfriend to creepy college boys visiting on break.”

I shudder at the thought of Pete because there’s something so unsettling about that guy. Something in his eyes. He might be conventionally cute, but I am so not interested.

“Anyways, so one night when he wasn’t home yet, I just crawled into his bed. Naked.”

“And he just got in there with you?”

Amber rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “No, because he’s a stubborn ass. So my naked phase had a bit more work to it, but that’s not the point. The point is, it did tip the scales and that is how we ended up getting together.”

“Okay, but I’m not living in Nash’s house, like you were Quinn’s. And I’m pretty sure even if I could break into his house, that would be illegal.”

“I’m not saying you do exactly that. I’m just saying you need to get naked in front of him.”

“So you want me to strip naked in front of him at the festival? How exactly would that work? Because, again, that would be illegal.”

“Good point. And you can’t very well do it at the shop because that is unsanitary, and I happen to like Nash’s candy quite a bit. So let’s not ruin that for me, shall we?”

I just nod because this whole thing is seeming more complicated and maybe it just ultimately means Nash and I don’t belong together. As much as that thought makes it feel like I can’t breathe.

“What were you planning to wear today? Any chance it’s your candy cane striped leggings?”

“Why?” I ask, dragging the word out. “Wait. Is this your way of telling me those are too revealing? Because I’ve been wearing those for years and if there’s a camel toe situation and you’re the first person to mention it to me, I’m going to kill my sister.”

“No.” Amber cackles. “No camel toe, I promise. Just wear those with a white t-shirt and I’ll take care of the rest.”

We’re having one of our more summer-like days as far as weather goes. So, despite the fact that I’m on my way to a Christmas market, it’s eighty degrees outside. Amber’s plan for what I should wear is definitely weather appropriate and allows me to still be festive because I’m not a monster!. It’s just too damn hot to deal with sweaters. Sometimes Texas is dumb.

Let me rephrase; sometimes Texas weather is dumb. Because what I wanted to wear was my adorable matching Christmas sweater. Whatever. I have bigger fights to pick right now. Like namely why Nash didn’t follow through on our plan.

It’s not hard for me to find him once I breach the fairgrounds. He’s so tall and broad, like a big sexy teddy bear, only more ferocious. Because while I know that Nash is gentle, I feel completely safe with him in a way that I have no doubt he would do whatever it took to protect me.

This little charade is my chance to get him to acknowledge his feelings. We belong together. I know it’s just a matter of time before he sees it.

He's over in a crowd with Ian and a few of the other guys from their motorcycle club or whatever they call themselves now. They're not really a gang. And they're not like an official, official club; or maybe they are and I just don't know. But Nash never wears any of those vest things with the patches. He does ride a Harley when the weather is nice. At the moment, the guys have a booth at the market where they're raising funds for the new children's wing at the hospital.

I go straight to Nash and wrap my arms around his neck. I have to stand way up on my toes to reach him, but I press my lips to the corner of his mouth, giving him just the tiniest of kisses. Then I put my lips right next to his ear.

"We had a deal," I say. "You obviously forgot to pick me up."

"I never said I was going to pick you up," he says.

"So far you are a terrible fake boyfriend."

He tosses his head back and laughs, then wraps his thick arms around the small of my back.

Gah, the strength in those arms nearly steals my breath.

He looks down at me, grinning. He's just so rugged and handsome, so burly and big, and I want to rub all over him to mark my territory like some kind of cat in heat. That's probably not normal.

"Tell me," he starts, "What exactly is a fake boyfriend supposed to do?"

"Well, you're supposed to walk around the market with me. Hold my hand. Buy me treats. Oh, and tell me I'm beautiful."

"You're always beautiful, Roni," he says.

And I swear it's like they say in the movies, my heart actually skips a beat. Oh no, I hope I'm not developing some kind of murmur.

"What else?" he asks.

"You should definitely kiss me on the nose."

"On the nose?"

"Yes, that's very sweet and romantic. But then you should try to get me underneath the mistletoe so you can kiss me on the mouth." I waggle my eyebrows at him. "With tongue."

Again he laughs like I am the most hilarious thing he's ever seen. His laugh is big and glorious and just makes me smile.

"I love it when you laugh," I can't help but say. "It's my favorite sound."

He stares at me for a minute, then pats his stomach. "It's all the extra padding, makes for good acoustics."

I put my hand on his belly. "I like your extra padding too." I'm done pretending that I don't love everything about this man. "I like how big you are." I lean close to whisper. "Are you big all over?"

"Christ," he hisses. He links our fingers together so we're holding hands. "Let's do the market thing, my beautiful girlfriend, before I have to take you somewhere and spank your pretty little ass for being so damn naughty."

We walk hand-in-hand for a while, just looking at the various booths and saying hello to people we know as we pass them.

"You know I agreed to do this in front of that tool, Pete, not just the town in general," Nash mumbles. But he squeezes

my hand nonetheless.

“Maybe I just want to flaunt you as my boyfriend.”

“Fake boyfriend,” he corrects.

“Yeah, totally what I meant.”

“Can I ask you a question?” he asks.

“You can ask me anything.”

“How many tattoos do you have?”

I frown at him. “I don’t have any tattoos. Why?”

“Ian. That fucker. He had me all convinced he’d inked you all up.”

“Oh,” I say with an awkward laugh. “Was that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“I don’t mind the ink. Just didn’t like the idea of his hands on you.”

Yes!

“Okay, how about this? And if it’s too personal, you don’t have to answer. Is there a particular reason you’re still a virgin? You saving yourself for someone special?”

“Haven’t ever wanted anyone that much,” I say. “And I’ve never trusted anyone enough.”

“I get that,” he says.

He stops walking abruptly and pulls me into a hug. We stand there holding one another for a few breaths where I swear everything around us stills, goes completely silent, and all that I hear is the sound our hearts beating in time together. Bum bum, bum bum. Then he looks down into my face and kisses me on the tip of my nose.

I nearly swallow my tongue forcing myself not to declare my undying love for this man. He is the absolute sweetest. I want to make babies with him so I can see him kneel down with our littles and kiss their boo-boos and wipe away their tears.

I want to rewatch every funny movie and television show I've ever seen, just so I can hear him laugh through them. I want to rewatch all the ones that make me cry so I can feel him wrap me in those big, sturdy arms, and press my face to his thick chest. He is comfort and love personified, and if he doesn't feel the same way for me as I do for him, I think my soul might actually shrivel up and die.

We let go of one another and walk some more. He buys me a ridiculous but adorable headband that has those old-fashioned, large, colored bulbs that light up. It's so festive and happy and I immediately put it on my head.

"This is going to make my sister so jealous," I tell him.

He looks at me and chuckles. "And that pleases you?"

"Oh yes. We both love Christmas so much and have a tendency to get competitive with who can dress the most festive."

"I see."

"Look out!" someone yells.

I turn to see what's happening, but instead I'm hit with a wall of wet, cold something that drenches me. I shriek, but I'm pretty sure the sound is swallowed up by me getting a mouth full of snow.

Yep, snow.

Man-made snow, but still snow.

“Oh my God, Roni, I’m so sorry,” a voice yells from off to my right.

But I’m still wiping the frosty stuff from my face.

“Holy shit, guys, you hit her square on. You could have hurt her,” Nash barks. “Are you hurt?” he asks, rubbing a hand up my arm.

“I’m okay. Just cold. And wet.” I pull at my shirt, which is now basically shellacked to my body. Awesome. I bet that’s super flattering, highlighting all my bumps and wobbles like that.

“Sorry,” the person yells again.

From the voice it sounds like one of the Crawfords. Maybe Johnny.

“The snow machine kinda had an explosion,” he explains.

Someone thrusts a small towel into my hands. “Dry your face, Roni.” This is Amber’s voice. Now that I’m able to clean the wetness off my face enough to see around me. She leans close to my ear. “Okay, that was not how that was supposed to go. Are you hurt?”

“No.” I wipe my face some more, then look at the cloth. “So much for this being waterproof mascara,” I grumble.”

“It worked, but I apologize for getting you in the face too.” She gives me a big grin.

“Holy Fuck,” Nash says in a deep, growly voice.

“What? What’s the matter?”

I look at Amber. She’s got her lips folded in on themselves and she’s clearly holding back a smile. Then her words sink in.

It worked.

Naked phase.

Oh. My. God.

I glance back at Nash and he's just staring at me, his eyes eating up every inch of my body. I look down but I can't see anything. I mean I can see that my shirt is now pretty much completely transparent, but you know I'm wearing a bra and leggings and stuff. Since I'm a plus size girl, I wear industrial sized bras and panties so it's not like I'm standing out here advertising a demi bra and thong. So, I am fully covered.

"I have to get you the fuck out of here," Nash says. He grabs my hand and spins me around. And then we spin around again, as if he's lost and not sure of his bearings. Finally, he seems to figure out which direction we need to go and he tugs me behind him.

Amber laughs hysterically.

"It's not that funny," I yell to her.

"Uh-huh. Call me later. I'll want details."

There are whistles and catcalls, playful ones, of course, but Nash is growling at every man that comes within two feet of me. He then presses me up against his back to try to provide me some coverage. But evidently, it's still not enough for him.

"Fuck it," he grumbles. Then he swings me up in his arms to carry me bridal style. Then we head off in the direction of *the Candy Jar*.

"What's the matter, Nash?" I ask.

"What's the matter? For fuck's sake, kitten. Everyone in the goddamn town just saw all your bits and pieces. Might as well have stripped you down and showed them the details of all your pink parts."

I suck in a breath. “I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“Every other inch of your sexy legs are revealed.”

I look down and sure enough my leggings—you know the candy cane striped ones?—yeah, every white stripe is completely transparent. And my shirt, well, the shirt is see-thru, and I guess my bra is too because it’s white.

So yeah, I just showed everybody in the middle of Saddle Creek all my bits and pieces, which is, you know, outstanding. Just what I wanted to do right here, right before Christmas. I mean I am in no way ashamed of my curvy body. I like every dimple, every roll, but that doesn’t mean I want to broadcast my abundance in the town square.

I’m so glad my sister is out of town because she would have enjoyed the hell out of this. She’ll, of course, hear about it. There are no secrets in towns this small. And she’ll never let me live it down, but it is what it is.

At least for the moment, I’m in the safety of Nash’s arms. I snuggle my face up next to his neck and breathe in his scent. That warm, woodsy scent of his that always has a hint of cinnamon and cocoa powder. He smells like a kitchen with Christmas baking. Well, he smells like *his* kitchen. He smells like home.

He smells like mine.

“Everything’s highlighted, kitten,” he says.

He’s never called me ‘kitten’ before today, but every time he says it my panties get damp.

“Not everybody gets to see that,” he continues. “Nobody else should get to see what belongs to—”

He stops talking as we reach the back door of his candy shop. He sets me down.

Again, his eyes trail over every inch of my body. I feel completely exposed. My nipples are hard, diamond points and it has nothing to do with them being cold.

“Belongs to who, Nash?” I ask.

He tears his eyes away long enough to unlock the door and pull me inside.

“I want an answer,” I say. This time I pull off my soaked t-shirt. Then start to peel down my leggings. “Who do my pink parts belong to?”

But he doesn't answer me; instead, he picks me up and carries me to the staircase that leads to the tiny apartment upstairs. I've only been up here a handful of times. I know once upon a time Nash lived up here when his Granny owned the shop. But now he only stays here if he's too tired to drive home.

I wrap my legs around his waist as his tree-trunk thighs carry us up the stairs. I toe off my shoes, leaving them to fall haphazardly behind him.

Once we reach the door, he presses me against it. And then his mouth is on mine. I don't know what's happening. But I don't even care anymore. Because his tongue is in my mouth and his lips are running across mine and oh, God, I've never been kissed like this. I mean I've never really been kissed, but... but certainly not like this. I wiggle and then I feel that hard pipe beneath the layer of his zipper on his jeans.

Shamelessly, I rub myself on him and moan into his mouth. I'm done. I'm so done hiding how I feel about this man.

“Goddamn, kitten,” he growls. “Do you have any idea how much I fucking want you?”

“No, I really don’t. But if you want to tell me or show me or make me a bulleted list, I am really all here for all of those things.”

He chuckles, then opens the door. He runs his nose up my throat. “You smell good.”

“Hey, Nash. Do you remember what I said earlier?”

His hands grip and squeeze my ass, but he doesn’t say anything.

“I trust you enough,” I tell him.

He squeezes his eyes shut. “Oh, fuck, Roni.” Then his soft brown eyes open and focus on me. “And what about wanting me enough?”

“Well, why don’t you reach down there and see for yourself.”

chapter **thirty-three**

NASH

“Are you asking me to see how wet your pussy is, little girl?” I growl at her. I’ve never been this fucking hard and I’m surprised I haven’t already come in my pants. Roni is a walking wet dream.

“I am,” she says. “I already know, but I want you to know it too.”

I lick my lips. “You’re all slicked up for me, kitten?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“Christ. I’m gonna nut all over myself like a goddamn teenager before I even touch you. You’ve got me so hard.” I bring her over to the bed and drop her down and she bounces on it. “This ain’t as nice as my bed at home, but it’ll have to do because I’m too impatient to wait until then.”

She leans back on her elbows and parts her thighs wide. Those plain white, cotton panties, probably the same kind she’s been wearing for years, are so wet on her pussy, there’s a dark shadow between her legs.

“You wax?” I ask

She shakes her head.

“Good girl.” I open my jeans because I can’t handle the pressure anymore. I reach into my grey boxer briefs and tug at my erection. It’s not what I want or what I need, but it feels good. “Take off your panties and show me that pussy. Let me see how wet you are.”

She lays back and pulls them off in some kind of magical movement. They fly over my shoulder and then she’s laying back on the bed wearing only that soaked-thru bra. Her hard nipples press at the damp fabric.

“Bra,” I groan. I squeeze the root of my dick.

She pulls it off, then gets up on her knees. “Can I see it?” she asks.

“My cock?”

“Yes,” she says, her voice full of eagerness.

Her brown eyes look up at me and she’s all innocence and sex and it’s a look that’s purely my Roni. I am such a goner for this woman. I pull my hand out of my boxers, then tug down my waistband so the head of my erection pokes through.

She grabs onto that waistband though—with both hands—and pulls them straight down to my knees. Then her hands are on me exploring. “You’re so big, Nash. Long and thick.” She runs one finger up the underside. “I like this vein.”

I release some kind of strangled noise. “Lick it. Kitten. Wrap your lips around my dick.”

She bends forward and does just that. She’s so eager, up on her hands and knees, her lips and tongue exploring my cock.

I reach between her legs and she’s so wet, her pussy’s leaked onto her thighs. She’s slippery and hungry for anything I give her.

“This pussy is soaked. Were you walking around the Christmas market with a wet pussy?”

She nods, then her lips slide all the way around my cockhead.

“Fuck, kitten, that’s it. You swallow that dick. You want to come on my hand while I fuck your pretty mouth?” I ask her.

She nods, moaning around my shaft.

I lightly spank her pussy once just because I can, then I slide two fingers inside her. I know it’ll be tight in that virgin channel, but I’m going to fuck her and I’ve got to get her ready for me. I’m a big motherfucker, so she’s gotta be prepared.

From this angle, I can finger fuck her g-spot while my heel rubs against her clit. The first time my fingertips scrape against that inner wall of her pussy she nearly levitates off the bed.

Her mouth comes off my dick and she cries out.

I stop moving my hand. “That’s your freebie because it was your first time with that. But you’ve got to keep your mouth on my dick, or I stop moving my hand. Those are the rules. Understand?”

She opens her mouth, tongue out and nods.

I guide my cock back into her mouth. “See how far you can take me back. Don’t choke yourself though; just relax your throat and suck me down.” I go back to moving my fingers, slowly fucking her tight, tight pussy while I rhythmically rub against her clit.

She’s rocking subtly against my hand and whimpering. But she leans forward and sucks me deeper into her mouth.

“Christ, kitten. I can’t tell which will be sweeter, your mouth or your pussy.” I pump my hips gently so as to not overwhelm her, then I increase the speed and pressure with my hand.

She sucks harder, hollowing her cheeks as her tongue works the underside of my cock head.

“Fuck, Roni. Do you know how many times I’ve had to come up here in the middle of the workday to take a cold shower because you’ve got me so hard I can’t take it anymore?”

She moans and rocks back on my hand more forcefully. But her mouth has stopped sucking and licking, she’s just holding me between her lips.

“That’s right, kitten. You come in wearing those tight leggings and then lean over that glass display case and I can see your plump ass. Sometimes I imagine I can see the outline of your pussy, and I have to come up here wanting to fuck my fist, but I never let myself. I end up just getting in the shower and freezing my dick so I can make it through the rest of the day.”

She releases my dick with a pop. “I can’t help it, Nash. I can’t concentrate. Oh, God, it’s so good, please make me come.”

“Any time you need it, I’ll make you come.”

“Because my pink parts, they belong to you,” she says.

“They sure as fuck do,” I say.

Then she shatters on my hand. Her body twitches with pleasure as the climax shuttles through her body. She screams my name and keeps on coming. Finally, when she’s done, she rolls over onto her back and holds her arms out to me.

“Please make love to me, Nash. I saved myself for you, so take it now.”

I finish taking off my clothes, then crawl over her body, mindful not to squash her. She runs her hand up my stomach.

“I love your body so much. Love your chest and stomach hair and how thick and strong you are,” she says.

“I love how soft and curvy your body is. You’re so perfect, my sassy little kitten.” I rub my dick through her slick folds a few times. “You should know though, I don’t have any condoms. You on the pill or something?”

“Or something,” she says.

“I’m clean, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“I’m not worried about anything.” She lifts her legs, wrapping them around my waist, opening herself up to me.

I don’t deserve this woman, this beautiful gift she’s giving me. But I’m going to take it anyways because it’s the most precious thing I’ve ever been offered.

“You are so beautiful,” I say.

She smiles at me, her brown eyes lit from within. “Will you kiss me again? Especially when you’re sliding inside?”

I want to tell her that I’ll kiss her every moment for the rest of my life, but that seems a little much, so I just kiss her for a moment. Soft nibbles at first and then deepening our kiss until our tongues are sliding against one another, wrestling for dominance.

The wet heat of her pussy rubs against my dick every time she moves beneath me. I want to notch myself and thrust inside. But I don’t want to hurt her.

So I keep kissing her. She breaks the kiss and catches my gaze. “Are you going to put it inside me?”

“I figured you were enjoying rubbing your wet pussy all over my dick. Am I wrong?”

“No, it feels so good.”

She keeps bucking against me and goddamn that slick pussy feels incredible.

“I think I’m going to come again,” she says.

“Good. After you start coming, I’m going to thrust inside you. I want to feel your pussy squeezing my dick.”

I rock against her to tap that clit and her orgasm hits, fresh wetness slicking my cock. I notch my tip, shift my hips forward, slowly pushing inside her. She’s hot and wet and so fucking tight.

Then I remember I’m supposed to be kissing her, so I do that, claiming her mouth like I’m claiming her pussy.

Her dainty hands grab hold of my ass and pull me closer, so I thrust until I’m seated all the way inside her channel.

She breaks free from the kiss. “Move, please.”

“You want me to get off?” I ask.

“No.” She bucks a little. “Fuck me, Nash. Fuck me hard.” Her legs tighten and her nails dig into my flesh.

And I fuck her. Nothing has ever felt so good. Impossibly tight. Impossibly slick. Impossibly mine.

Mine, mine. Mine.

That runs through my head with every thrust I make.

“Oh my God, is it always like this?” she asks.

“No.” I push myself up so I can see her face more and I increase my speed, because if I don’t come soon I think my balls might explode. I want to ask her to marry me. I hope I plant my baby in her belly so she has to marry me, which I know is complete insanity.

“It’s not always like this, kitten.”

“It’s because it’s us,” she says.

“Yeah. Fuck, I need to come.”

“Come inside me, Nash, please,” she says.

Then suddenly she screams and her pussy is clenching my cock as she climaxes yet again. “Oh my God,” she pants.

I growl her name and let go, emptying myself inside of her. It’s the first orgasm I’ve had in so damn long because I haven’t wanted to jack off to her. It seemed wrong. But everything about this seems so perfectly right.

I kiss her softly, then kiss the tip of her nose. Finally, I force my softening dick to withdraw so I can go to the bathroom and get something to clean us up with.

Any other time I’ve been with a woman, I’ve wanted to get the hell out of there to get home, shower and go to bed. Right now I want to hold my sweet kitten. But I also feel so energized. I want to go ring shopping and announce to the entire town that I finally pulled my head out of my ass and came to my senses where this woman is concerned.

But I lay on my back so she can put her head on my chest. Her fingers rub through my chest and belly hair she claims to love.

I’m just about to tell her that I’m in love with her when I realize she’s fallen asleep.

chapter **thirty-four**

Roni

“I’m not sure if I’m dreaming or not,” I say.

The warm mouth moves southward on my body. “Not dreaming, kitten. I didn’t get to taste you earlier.” He snuggles his big body between my legs. Then he leans forward and licks me from my opening all the way to the top of my clit, where he briefly sucks that bundle of nerves into his mouth.

“Nash, yes,” I moan.

His tongue circles around my clit, then he moves lower to slide it inside my pussy. In effect, fucking me with his tongue. It’s filthy and carnal and so delicious.

I put my fingers on his head, scraping my nails against his scalp. “I could get used to waking up like this.”

I buck against his mouth because I want more. But he’s having none of my petulance. He drops a heavy arm across my hips, pressing me into the bed and weighing me down. This keeps me spread open to his mouth like I’m a damn buffet.

He keeps fucking me with his tongue, then using his thumb and forefinger to roll my clit. The sensations are driving me wild. Pleasure builds, heating my core.

“Please don’t stop. Don’t ever stop.”

And he doesn’t. His ministrations continue, over and over, and I know I’m rocketing towards a climax. He pinches my clit and I cry out his name as my body explodes with ecstasy. He licks and sucks every last wave of pleasure, then he crawls up my body, kissing each nipple as he goes.

I’m boneless and sated and I’m sure I have a ridiculously goofy smile on my lips, but I can’t find enough energy to care.

He moves his big body next to me and I roll to my side to face him.

“Do you want me to take care of you?” I ask.

“Not right now. Can we talk for a little while?” he asks.

My stomach tightens with dread. “Yeah. What did you want to talk about?” I inwardly wince, worried that I might have jumped the proverbial gun when I texted Amber back at some point while Nash was in the bathroom and told her that her plan—as crazy as it had been—had worked perfectly.

“Anything. Everything. Tell me something about you. Something you’ve never told anyone,” he says.

“Alright, let’s see. I’m terrified of monkeys.”

His brows shoot up. “Monkeys?”

“Yeah.” I shudder. “Creepy little hands and they scream. Just don’t like them.”

“Any particular kind?”

“All of them really. One of the many reasons I hate going to the zoo.”

“The other reasons?”

“Makes me sad to see the animals in captivity. I know modern zoos are more rehabilitative and help with rehoming animals who can’t return to their natural habitat, but it still makes me sad.”

“You are a beautiful soul, Veronica Cuevas,” he says.

“Thank you.”

“Except when it comes to monkeys.”

I poke him in the side. “I don’t want to hurt them. I just don’t want to have to be around them. So did you always want to take over your family’s candy shop? I mean is that the job you wanted when you were younger?” I ask.

He leans up on one big elbow. “No. I wanted to play professional football. But I blew out my knee my senior year of high school. That and I’m not sure I was all that good.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard. People in this town still talk about that winning touchdown catch you made to bring that championship trophy home.”

Surprise crosses his features. “You’ve heard that story?”

“Of course. Before I came to work for you, I was asking around about you. It was when I worked at the pre-school in town, and I’d come into the store and then I’d seen you around. You ask the right people and you can get all kinds of information.”

“Your sister works in the salon,” he says dryly.

“That too.” I laugh. “Jackie is definitely a good source of town gossip.”

“Where is your sister? I haven’t seen her around the last few days.”

“She’s up in the mountains in Oklahoma. Snowed in, actually. With special agent Luca Daniels.”

“No shit?”

“What?” I ask.

“I always thought those two belonged together. Glad they finally figured it out.” He puts a hand on my naked thigh and squeezes me. “So, I know you didn’t think about working in my candy shop when you were a little girl. What are your dreams, kitten?”

His question pulls at my heart and suddenly I’ve got tears stinging my eyes.

“Hey, what’s that about?” He leans up, thumbs rubbing beneath my eyes. “You can tell me anything; you know that don’t you?”

I nod and swallow the tight lump in my throat. “My mama died when I was pretty young. I was seven, I think. Jackie was older; she always took care of me. And we had our daddy.”

“But you lost him a couple of years ago,” Nash says. “Good man.”

A wistful smile tugs at my lips. “Yeah, he truly was. Anyways, it was just the three of us for so long.” I inhale slowly, taking as big of a breath as I can manage. “I can’t really explain it, but I felt out of place, like somehow I was supposed to be part of a bigger family. I’d look at Johnny and Madison in school and I was jealous of all their siblings. Some of the other larger sibling groups around too, like the Darling family.” I sigh.

“I know that probably sounds so stupid, but at some point, when it became clear I wasn’t going to get any more siblings, I

figured I felt that way because it must mean I was intended to have a large family of my own.”

“I don’t think any of this sounds stupid, Roni.” He squeezes my hip again.

“Jackie had similar feelings, only hers were just about wanting to be a mom. I hope that Luca gives that to her. She deserves it. But yeah, I don’t really know what that thing is in me. I love kids. It’s why I worked at the pre-school before I worked for you. I thought it might help.”

“Did it?”

“No.” I shake my head against the pillow. “Just made my baby fever worse. That’s why I had to quit.” I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment. “That felt selfish and immature. Like I couldn’t handle being around other people’s kids.”

“Maybe you were just meant to come work with me. You did have that great idea to add the dreamsicle fudge, and it’s one of our top sellers.”

I give a watery laugh. “Maybe so.” I wish that meant he thought me working there is what finally brought us together and maybe we could make a big family.

“I didn’t have a big family either,” he says instead. “It was just me and Granny. I never met my mom. My dad dropped me off with his mom and he’d come back into town periodically. He was in the service. Then when he got out, the booze got him, and well, he was younger than I am now when he died.”

“I’m sorry, Nash.”

“No, kitten, don’t be sorry. I never lacked for anything. He loved me enough to bring me to the woman he knew would raise me right. And she did.” His eyes shine as he speaks of his

family. “Granny was a force. She was small like you, but fierce and had a mouth on her that could make a sailor blush. But she was on the third row of the Baptist church every Sunday.”

“I wish I could have met her.”

“She would have loved you.” Then he leans over and kisses me, pressing my back into the bed while he gives me a sweet, passionate kiss that seems to say something.

But I’m too inexperienced to decipher the hidden meaning. So, I just kiss him back and hope he knows how much I love him.

chapter **thirty-five**

NASH

I didn't want to let Roni go home to take a shower, but I couldn't very well keep her hostage in the shitty apartment above my shop. I don't even live there anymore. So we go our separate ways, but it will be temporary.

And the separation allows me to do a special errand I couldn't have done with Roni. Thankfully most of the people in this town think fondly of me, or at least my sweets, because I was able to convince Mr. Fritz to open his jewelry store for me in exchange for a pound of our Christmas special peppermint candied fudge. It's his and his wife's favorite.

Now I've got a velvet black box weighing down my front pocket and I'm headed to find my girl. When I knock at her house though, there's no answer. I try her phone, but she doesn't answer there either.

So I shoot a quick text to Amber, because those two ladies talk all the time.

ME: Hey, it's Nash. Do you happen to know where Roni is?

AMBER: Yeah. She's actually at Gator's with the rest of us. We're on the back patio eating crawfish. They had an early batch come in.

ME: Keep her there for me. I'm on my way.

AMBER: Will do.

This is actually kinda perfect. I'm not really one for big romantic gestures, but Roni deserves for me to publicly claim her. She's the most perfect woman in the world and I want everyone to know how I feel about her. I pat the ring box in my pocket and head to Gator's, the Cajun restaurant owned by the Guidry family in town. Great people and great food.

But right now, all I care about is finding my kitten.

By the time I get there, the restaurant itself is pretty packed too, so I have to wade through tables of people before I can get to the outside space.

"Oh there he is now. That old guy she claims is her boyfriend," a voice says from next to me.

I turn and sure enough there's Pete, and he's sitting at a table with similarly dressed guys about his age. Fraternity brothers, I'm guessing.

"Come here a minute," he calls to me, his words slurred, a clear indication that he's obviously drunk.

"I don't have anything to say to you. And it sounds like you've had enough to drink."

"You're not my fucking father, you fat bastard," he hisses at me.

“Pete,” one of the guys says. But the other two just laugh at his antics.

I brace my fingertips on the table and lean closer. “I don’t know what this obsession is about with my girl, but you need to back the fuck off.”

“Points, my man,” one of the other guys says. “It’s about points.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I say, shaking my head.

“Most universities have competitions like this these days. Some are run through fraternities, like ours, but not all of them,” he continues.

“What kind of competitions?” I ask.

“Chicks and fucking,” Pete says. “Each of them are worth a certain number of points depending on the circumstances.”

I’m going to rip this motherfucker’s throat out with my bare hands. I’m pretty sure I’m snarling at this point.

“A virgin over the age of twenty is like the holy grail,” the other guy says.

“And she’s not even ugly. Even if she’s on the fat side.”

Now I’m going to have to kill all of them.

I lean even closer so I’m right in Pete’s face. “Let me make this very clear to you. I popped her fucking cherry, so she should be worthless to you and your stupid competition now.”

There’s a gasp behind me and I turn to see Roni standing there looking at me, her face pale and full of hurt.

Fuck.

“Kitten,” I say. But she’s already turned around and is running away from me. I growl and turn back to face the guys

one more time. “I suggest you bastards get the fuck out of town before I decide to not be merciful and rip your heads off.”

As I’m walking away I hear Wade Guidry, a former Navy SEAL, tell the guys their tab has been closed and they need to leave immediately.

I love this town. And I’ll thank Wade later. Right now, I’ve got to find my girl because I don’t know what she thinks she heard, but she’s definitely wrong.

Thankfully, I don’t have to go far to find her. Kelli Guidry, Wade’s wife has her wrapped in a big hug right outside the restaurant.

I can hear Roni’s sobs from here and they filet me right open.

“Kitten, no,” I say.

She stiffens at the sound of my voice and it’s like a knee to my balls.

“Kelli, thanks, I’ve got this.”

She nods and gives me a little wink. “Wade is taking the riffraff out back with the trash.”

“Where they belong. Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

“Roni,” I lightly grab her shoulders. “Where can we go where you’ll feel safe to hear me out? You wanna go across to the park and sit on a bench? Back to the shop? Tell me, I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

“I don’t need you take me some place special to break my heart, Nash. You can do it right here on the street.”

“Oh my sweet, sweet, kitten, I’m not going to break your heart. Not today. Hopefully not ever. Never on purpose.” I grab her hand and pull her so we can cross the street diagonally and step into the park. There are a handful of benches and I just find the first one. I sit and pull her into my lap. “Now, we can do this a few ways.”

“Just do it quickly,” she says with a sniff.

“Whatever you heard that I said to that fucker, it wasn’t the whole story. Roni, I am so wildly in love with you, I want to paint your name across the water tower.”

She sucks in a breath.

“You are my whole world, kitten. My everything. I rushed to Gator’s to be by your side when I couldn’t find you and you weren’t answering your phone.”

“My hands were full of crawfish juice and gunk.”

“Which is a good reason for not touching your phone.”

“I should have texted you an invite, but I didn’t really know what to make of what happened between us. You didn’t say anything about the future or tell me you cared about me other than wanting to have sex or whatever, and I was trying to be mature about the whole thing,” she says.

“I had some things I needed to take care of, and I couldn’t have you with me to do them,” I say.

“Oh.” Her voice sounds defeated.

I dig in my pocket and pull out the black box. “I wanted to surprise you with this. I didn’t want you tell me it was too big or too expensive or anything like that. But Veronica, I can’t hold it in anymore. I tried to stay away from you. I tried to be the good guy and ignore how I felt so you could be with a

younger guy. But then you had to crawl all over my big body, telling me how much you wanted me and only trusted me. Christ, please say you'll be my wife."

She squeals and throws her arms around my neck. "Yes, of course I'll be your wife." Then she kisses all over my face. A hundred little pecks of her lips, everywhere she can reach, and it makes me laugh and just lights my fucking soul on fire.

"You are everything to me," I say, slipping that engagement ring on her finger.

"I love you so much, Nash. I know all that stuff I said about needing a big family might have scared you or whatever. I'll be happy just being your wife. So it's okay if you don't want kids."

"Who said I didn't want kids?"

"No one, I just assumed."

I stand up, picking her up with me. "You want kids, let's go make one right now."

She laughs.

Then I remember what she told me before we made love last night. "Though you did say you were on something."

"No, I said, or something, which probably wasn't very nice. I wasn't trying to like steal your sperm or anything. I wasn't thinking that far in advance. I just really wanted you to put your dick inside me."

"Fuck, kitten, you're so perfect."

"I would like your dick in me again soon," she says.

"Let's go back to my house this time so we can spread out in my California King and not have to squish all up in that

small bed in the apartment.”

“I’m probably still going to squish up on you.”

“Anytime you want. Consider me your husband-sized teddy bear.”

epilogue

RONI

Summer...

My backyard is filled with the smoky scent of grilling meat. It's hot as a thousand suns out here, but bearable because my husband has made this an oasis for us.

"I can't believe Nash built you a pool," my sister Jackie says. She's got a hand on her pregnant belly and is rocking a large pair of bright orange sunglasses. "Luca!" she hollers at her own husband.

He looks up from where he stands over by the grill next to Nash. They're each holding a pair of tongs, which makes no sense when only one man can flip burgers at a time. Must be a guy thing.

"What are they even doing over there? Dueling barbecue?" I ask.

Jackie snorts.

"Yeah, baby doll?" Luca asks.

"Why haven't you built me a pool?"

He glances at his brother-in-law, and they exchange something we can't hear from where we are lounging on our pool floats.

“You want a pool?” he asks.

“Yeah. Look how nice this is. I mean their yard is humongous I realize, and ours is tiny. But still. It's like a resort back here, Ron, you realize that?”

I glance over at Nash and blow him a kiss. The silvery-grey in his beard and at his temples shines in the sunlight and he looks so handsome. “I know. It's perfect.” Nash's house—our house—is on a bigger piece of land at the edge of town. It's a little more of a drive to get to work now, but it's so quiet and beautiful out here. I can drink coffee on the back porch and watch the deer and other wildlife wander around on our property.

“You can have their pool,” Luca says.

“Oh geez, thanks.” Jackie rolls her eyes so exaggeratedly, I can somehow still see the movement behind her enormous glasses.

“No, crazy lady,” Luca says playfully.

Their romance is one built on banter and sniping at each other. But they're crazy in love. That man would do anything for my sister, so I, of course, adore him.

“I mean, you can share their pool. We bought the property behind theirs so our yards will back up to each other,” Luca says.

Jackie sits up so quickly she flips herself off her float. She stands up sputtering, her hair a wall of wet, black silk hanging in her face. “What are you talking about?”

I know what's going on. The guys had been working on this surprise behind both of our backs, but I found them out there in the woods one day and well, that's just weird. So I knew they were plotting something and I was just hoping they weren't burying a body back there together. I mean I'm all for our guys bonding, but I draw the line at criminal behavior. Though I suppose a former FBI agent is the best person to have on your side if you do want to try your hand at a life of crime.

What am I even thinking? There was no crime. No body. Just plans to build Jackie and Luca a house so that it backed up to mine and Nash's. This is my big family. Jackie is pregnant and due soon.

After Nash and I got married, we decided to wait a little while because I realized I wasn't actually in such a hurry. But babies have a tendency of coming when they want, despite your best plans. And we weren't really doing all that much to try to prevent it. I'm not very far along, but far enough that the doctor was able to tell me that she heard two strong heartbeats in there.

Twins.

The thought of my kids and Jackie's kids all growing up on a big chunk of land together just fills me with so much joy, it leaks out my eyes. Okay, I'm crying. Whatever.

The men set down their tongs and walk over to the pool. Luca helps Jackie right herself back on her float. She's crying too.

She points at me. "Did you know about this?"

I nod. "Only recently though. They've been planning it for months."

“Since before the pool,” Nash says. “The pool is on our side. Their side will get the playscape.”

“Oh my God.” Jackie visibly swallows and I swear to God I see tears in her eyes.

My sister acts so tough and sassy, but beneath that, she is pure fluff. I’m just glad Luca finally broke through her hand candy shell.

“Y’all are the best,” Jackie says, her lip trembling.

The guys bump elbows.

Just then we hear car doors slam and voices.

“Probably Ian and his mystery date,” Nash says.

“He’s bringing a date?” I ask. “You didn’t tell me that!”

“Of course I didn’t. Because then you would have asked me a thousand questions I didn’t know the answer to, and I just wanted to get you naked.”

“Nash!” Jackie holds up a hand. “We’ve talked about this, I do not want to hear you dirty talk to my sister. So cut that out right now.”

“Baby doll, he just said the word ‘naked,’ don’t be so sensitive.”

I can hear footsteps approaching. Which means Ian and his mystery date are going to be here any second. And the last thing Ian needs is for his date to walk into this shit show of a conversation. He has had enough trouble in the past few months without us scaring her off.

“I’m pregnant!” I say spontaneously since I know that will shut down the other conversation. I hold up two fingers. “With twins.”

Luca smacks Nash in the gut. “Over-achiever.”

Nash, just laughs, looking so proud he could bust.

And the look he gives me, which is hot and possessive and just about makes my swimsuit burst into flames ... oh, boy, that look is everything. He is everything. Everything I ever wanted for Christmas and for always.

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excerpt from a very cheeky christmas



ANDREW

I have a great ass.

It's true. I'm not even bragging. It is, in fact, my job to have a good behind. Well, technically my work often goes beyond my booty, but my ass is what gets me the jobs. I'm a set double, body double, ass double. Whatever you want to call it.

When leading men don't want to do naked work, they call on me. I don't mind showing off my body as long as I don't have to act or show my face. Not that there's anything wrong with my face, but doing the physical work of a scene is what I'm good at.

That most recent big budget alien action flick... yeah, that was my ass. It was painted blue for the movie, but still me. Hollywood has been good to me and I've been smart with my money, investing most of it because I knew with a job like mine, eventually the work would move on to younger guys. I'm approaching forty and frankly I'm getting tired of the work.

I'm ready to find my lady love and settle down, fill our house with kids and live happily ever after. Isn't that what all these movies we make are about?

Okay, not that one asteroid movie. I wasn't in that one, thank goodness because everyone died. Talk about depressing.

In any case, I'm on set working with the director on blocking a scene. It's one of the more technical parts of my job and something I enjoy quite a bit. I'm basically like a living prop though, really used just to get the lighting and camera angles set up correctly on shots they want to try to get in one take.

"This isn't working," Luca, the director, mutters to himself.

That's when I see her. And by her, I mean *HER*. The woman I've noticed on set since we've been working for all of three days now on this new movie. It's a rushed, last minute holiday flick that seems to have everyone in a bad mood. Not me, I don't tend to get in bad moods much.

Seems like a waste of energy, especially when a cold beer and an orgasm can fix most things.

“Luca, hold up. I think I know what would help.” I step off the set and lightly jog over to her. I step right in front of her path. “Hey,” I say.

She frowns and tries to walk around me.

“Wait, I wanna talk to you.”

“No thanks.”

“Perfect, Andrew,” Luca calls. “Yes, Maxine, can you help us out for a few minutes?”

Maxine’s blue eyes widen behind her black-rimmed glasses. She gives Luca a tight smile, then shoots me a tiny glare before setting down her stuff on the concrete floor.

“What can I do?” Maxine asks Luca.

She’s clearly done with me which I find fucking delightful. I don’t know why. The fact that she’s not immediately charmed by me is refreshing, I guess. Or maybe I just am drawn to her sass. More likely I’m drawn to that plump ass of hers and her full tits; she’s all curves and softness, but when she talks, her voice is sharp and edgy. There’s also an undeniable intelligence shining in her eyes and fuck if that’s not catnip for me. Especially after living in this vapid wasteland for the last decade.

Hollywood is known for its pretty views, not for its intellectual stimulation. Not that Saddle Creek, TX, my small hometown, is an epicenter of culture. But I do miss going to the library, then walking down to Ruthie’s Diner with a stack of books to pore over while I eat one of her famous burgers.

“Andrew,” Luca barks.

“Right.” I tear my eyes away from Maxine’s curvy backside which somehow had me homesick for my favorite juicy hamburger. There’s something about this woman, I can feel it.

I make my way back into the fake living room where there’s a Christmas tree and a stack of boxes leaning against the wall. They’re empty boxes, but in the story of the movie they’re filled with all kinds of decorations for the two main love interests to get tangled up in. Or something like that.

Luca is explaining the scene and the whole concept of blocking and the angle of the cameras and lighting. She’s just staring at him like he’s a complete idiot.

“I think she’s got it, Luca. Let’s just give it a go.” I say, giving a gentle tug on the director’s shirt sleeve. We’ve worked together multiple times before, so he knows me.

He growls, which is par for his course, but still walks off the platform and moves back to the camera area.

“Explain the set up to her while we adjust the equipment,” Luca yells.

She gives me a snort of derision. “Who are you, like the main actor?”

“No, sweetheart, I’m just his set double.”

Those blue eyes of hers roll. “So what is it that I need to do?”

“This is one of those scenes they want to preferably get in one take so that’s why we—”

“I know what scene blocking is, jackass. Just tell me about this scene.”

Fuck. Why does that sassy mouth make my dick hard? “Sure thing. The heroine is just walking through the room and a tower of boxes nearly topples over, hero rushes over to sweep her out of the way, they end up plastered against the wall together.”

She glances to her left at said tower of boxes. “What are in them?”

“Nothing. But they’re supposed to be filled with Christmas decorations. I’m Andrew, by the way.”

“Max.”

“I’ve seen you here, but never on any other sets. Are you a new actress?” I ask.

She snorts. “Yeah, right. Because they hire female stars with asses like mine all the time.”

I look down even though I can’t exactly see much of her ass from this angle. But her hips and thighs are thick and curvy. “They should, because your body is damn near perfect.”

She laughs and the sound is pure fucking magic. It’s like a salve on sunburnt skin or water quenching a parched throat. Where has this woman been all my life?

“Oh my God! Do lines like that usually work?”

I raise a brow at her. “Who says it’s a line?”

She puts her fists on her hips. “That is blatantly... obviously a line.”

“Okay, so the boxes are toppling, and you move now Andrew,” Luca calls.

I grab Maxine and maneuver out of the imaginary harm’s way, putting her back up against the fake wallpapered wall.

“Excellent. Now step closer and brace your hands on either side of her head.”

I do as I’m told, leaning in closer to Maxine. She sucks in a breath that, had I not heard it, I might have missed. She’s not as unaffected by me as she’s pretending to be.

“Okay, if you’re not an actress, then what do you do on set?”

“I am in charge of color-coding all of the glitter used in the scenes.”

“Maxine, put your hands on Andrew’s hips,” Luca says.

She swallows visibly, but then I feel her hands on the outsides of my jeans.

“No, no! I know you’re not an actress,” Luca yells. “But can you pretend you want to be there. Grab onto him.”

Her fingers curl into my hips and fuck me, Luca doesn’t even know what he’s asking of me.

I lick my lips, flick my eyes down to her mouth briefly, then back up to her gaze.

“This is so forced and contrived. I will never understand how costars hook up so frequently,” she says, but her voice has lost some of its edge.

“Are you doubting the necessity of our fearless hero saving our intrepid heroine?”

She rolls her eyes. “Please. If the boxes are falling and she can’t get out of the way before he has time to run across the room and save her, then maybe she deserves to get crushed.”

“Maybe shock and panic keep her from moving.”

This time she snorts. “What is she? An armadillo? Does she roll into a ball too?”

I toss my head back and laugh. “You’re delightful, sweetheart. Have dinner with me.”

Her smile disappears. “Um ... no, thank you.”

“Why not?”

“Look, I’m sure I seem like low hanging fruit on the set, but I’ve been around guys like you my entire life and honestly, I need more than a pretty face. Besides, it’s not going to hurt you to put in the effort to charm someone else.”

I shake my head in confusion. “Low hanging fruit? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means any guy who is as good looking as you can get laid any time he wants. Even in Hollywood. Still, I get it. You look around the set, try to find a woman who will take the least amount of work. The woman who’s a little frumpy, more than a little chubby and will probably just be grateful for the attention. But sorry, I will not be that woman.”

She’s got it all wrong. Everything she just said is wrong. I grin at her.

“I’m beginning to think that you might be slow-witted, as they say,” she hisses.

“A little closer, Andrew,” Luca barks.

And a little closer is all I need to completely close the distance between our mouths. I can’t help myself. I’ve got to taste for myself and see if all those snarky words make for a tart kiss. I should have known better. She tastes like cinnamon and cloves and Christmas morning.

Her fingernails—blunt though they are—dig into my hips as she tightens her hold on me. She kisses me back, her tongue sweeping into my mouth in a bold, take-charge kind of way.

She makes a whimpering noise in her throat.

Laughter sounds from behind us. Fucking Luca and the camera guys. It definitely breaks the spell though because the next thing I know, I've got a knee to my groin and two palms pushing against my chest.

I fall to the set floor with a 'oof.'

"Jackass," she mutters, then she storms off.

Luca meanders over, still chuckling. "You probably want to ice your balls." His laughter increases.

"It's not that funny. I'll just go see the medic," I say, wincing in pain.

Luca howls with laughter. He tosses his thumb over his shoulder. "Maxine *IS* the medic."

Fuck my life.

Grab your copy of [**A Very Cheeky Christmas**](#)



about the author

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR, Kat Baxter writes fast-paced, sweet & STEAMY romantic comedies. Readers have dubbed her “The Queen of Adorkable.” and her books “laugh-out-loud funny,” and “hot enough to melt your kindle.” She lives in Texas with her family and a menagerie of animals. Kat is the pseudonym for a bestselling historical romance author.

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