



Christmas

PAST,

PRESENT,

and

FOREVER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LIZABETH SCOTT

CHRISTMAS PAST,
PRESENT, AND FOREVER

A ROCKSTAR SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE



LIZABETH SCOTT



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Everyday you inspire me to write the words you want to read. Your support and friendship means so much to me, and I deeply thank you.

XOXO

♥Liz

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Get ready to be swept away in a heartwarming and enchanting holiday tale that will rekindle your belief in the magic of second chances.

When McKenna gave her heart to the boy next door years ago, she believed he was the love of her life. But he shattered her heart when he walked away on Christmas Eve for the pull of the stage and thousands of screaming fans.

That's when she swore off love and all things Christmas.

Unfortunately, this holiday season, he shows back up in town and sparks reignite. Soon they discover those feelings never went away.

Nash Hudson always knew he belonged on a stage – even if it meant leaving the girl he loved behind. Now he's determined to make amends by returning home and showing McKenna he's changed and worthy of a second chance. And as snow falls, he knows he'll do whatever it takes to melt the ice protecting her heart.

Can they possibly have a future when the ghost of Christmas past is all around them?

CHAPTER ONE



NASH HUDSON

“Thank you, Raleigh!” The frenzied crowd before me goes wild. Shouting. Screaming. Stomping their feet. Signs wave in the air hoping I’ll notice. The sound is thunderous enough, and then add the band and the decibel level is near deafening. Flowers, lacy bras, and silk panties snow down around me, landing on the stage. I feel sorry for the person who has to clean it all up.

With a sublime smile on my face, I throw my arms out to my sides, soaking it all in. The beat of the drums and the pounding of the bass are in rhythm with my racing heart. Sweat pours down my chest and I’m glad my shirt was torn from my body when I got a little too close to the fans. They love seeing my tattoos—the ones I allow them to see—but I’ll catch hell from wardrobe even though they’re used to it. At least my leather pants didn’t rip. This time.

“Nash! Nash! Nash!” The chant builds as the entire venue erupts. The force hitting me is a living, breathing beast demanding my attention and my appreciation. And I do appreciate every single one of the people who spent their hard-earned money to come to my shows and buy my records through the years. They are why Nash Hudson was practically an overnight success and enabled me to keep my headliner and bestseller status for ten years.

The chilling fear I had of being a one-hit wonder has never totally left me, but after each chart-topping release and sellout tour, the anxiety lessens. I had to fight imposter syndrome a lot during my first years in the business and it kept me from ever taking what I have for granted. I gave up a lot to be where I am now.

The day I walked away from my family and everything I'd ever known and loved was the day Nash Hudson, rock star was born. The day America voted and my name was announced as the winner of the *America's Star* reality television show. The whirlwind immediately after my win is still a confusing blur. Everyone pulling me in different directions. The career-changing decisions I had to make and navigating through a time where not everyone had my best interest at heart. Money does evil things to people, even people that are related to you by blood. I never imagined my own uncle taking advantage of me.

Regrets? Only one.

I say a final, "Goodnight, Raleigh, and thank you! Rock on!" Bowing and waving, and then holding my left hand over my heart, I turn and run off stage left.

A flash of blonde catches my eye only seconds before my arms are filled with a very willing woman. Her legs wrap around my waist and her mouth crashes against mine. Immediately my security have her in hand, pulling her from me. They give me a look over the top of her head, silently asking if I want her escorted to my dressing room or outside the venue. I shake my head and they get the message.

"But, Nash, I'm your biggest fan," she pleads as they unwrap her legs until she's standing on her own with the two beefy security guards on either side.

"Thanks, babe. I appreciate your support of my music. Reed here will see you safely to your car and thanks for coming tonight."

Her face screws up and her bottom lip trembles. I hate it when they cry. "But I thought we could have some fun. I'm up for anything, Nash. Absolutely *anything*."

I'm careful to keep the distaste from my face. "That's a very generous offer, but I'm going to have to pass." At my nod, Reed and Jake take her away. There was a time when I might have taken her up on her proposition. I'm not proud of that fact, but the excess of willing women came to an end when I realized they were poor substitutes for the woman I really wanted.

"Great show, man." Ford Lee, my agent and manager, slaps my back and hands me a bottle of chilled water.

"Thanks. The crowd was alive tonight." I guzzle half the bottle while following the procession of security down a maze of hallways and stairs to my dressing room. If it were up to me, I'd go straight to my bus for a shower and then fall into bed, but a much different agenda awaits me.

Ford follows along. "You have a short lineup tonight. Ten interviews and only a hundred VIP meet-and-greets."

I chuckle and finish off the water. Only Ford would think that's a short list. I'll be doing good to get out of here before three in the morning.

Once my dressing room door shuts, there's a flurry of activity. Wardrobe relieves me of the rest of my clothes. I jump in the shower for a quick wash before drying off and pulling on the clothes laid out for me. Another pair of leather pants and a black retro t-shirt.

While in the makeup chair having black eyeliner applied and my skin airbrushed to perfection, my MC boots appear on my feet. At the same time, my highlighted brown hair is being dried and styled to look messy and in-my-face annoying. Fuck, I want to cut it all off. Soon, I vow.

My team works like a well-choreographed troupe. Everyone knows their job and their own little piece of me is buffed and fluffed in record time.

In less than fifteen minutes after I walked in the door, I'm pushing out of the vanity chair. "Thanks, guys. Now go home and I don't want to see you for at least two weeks. Enjoy your time off and merry Christmas."

A chorus of *Merry Christmas* comes back at me. “You sure, boss?” Kate asks. “You might need a touchup between interviews.”

I pause before going through the door. “Go home. I’m a rock star. My makeup is supposed to be sliding off my face.” I grin, knowing the countdown is on. The very foundation of Nash Hudson will be rocked. When this tour is over, I’m not only cutting my hair, but I will never wear fucking eyeliner again.

I’m ushered into a large room with more than a hundred fans waiting for their moment of my time. A handshake or a hug, along with a signed picture, and then a photo is snapped that will show up who knows where.

Of all the perks of my fame, this is the one I love the most. My fans are incredible and I enjoy meeting them. Some have been with me since the beginning and they always tell me they voted for me on *America’s Star*.

Women always try to get too close and too familiar. I collected my share of phone numbers, and yes, I’ve called a few. Thankfully, I wised up and became much more selective in choosing the people I let into my private life. There haven’t been many and they’ve always known what I was asking for and what would never be offered.

The next in line gets my full attention. The little girl couldn’t be more than ten and is being pushed in a wheelchair by a man I assume is her father. I stand up from the table they have me sitting behind and take a knee by the smiling child. She’s dressed all in pink and reminds me of a fairy princess. “Hey, sweetheart, what’s your name?”

She smiles up at me and without an ounce of shyness announces, “Cathie Edmonds.”

“That’s a pretty name for a very pretty girl. Thank you for coming to my show. Did you like it?”

Her bouncy blonde curls spring as she nods enthusiastically. “I did. I know all the words to your songs.”

That's not necessarily a good thing. Hopefully she is too young to grasp the meaning of the lyrics. "Do you have a favorite?"

"I like 'Crazy Amazing.' I have it playing in my ear when I have a treatment."

Her words have me looking closer. There's a paleness to her skin and her beautiful blonde locks are most likely not her own hair. Chemo. Such a cruel disease for such a young child to endure. I will the smile on my face to stay in place and give her the best meet-and-greet of her dreams.

I nod to my assistant. "Hey, Cory, can you get my girl here a ton of stuff from the merch table and something special from me?" He meets my gaze and knows exactly what I mean. When little Miss Cathie Edmonds leaves here tonight, I'm guessing she'll be one happy girl. I'm not wrong. When Cory comes back, he's loaded down with shirts, hoodies, bags, and one of my signature Gibson guitars—which I sign and then even play a bit of "Crazy Amazing" for her.

After a few pictures with her and her family, she gives me a hug and I kiss her cheek. Her mom has silent tears streaming down her face and her dad looks choked up as well. They both thank me profusely, which I wave off. I have no idea what the future has in store for Cathie, but tonight she feels special and loved. That's all I can give her.

The next in line takes her place and security moves me back behind the table. And so it goes until my hand cramps and my face hurts from smiling. It doesn't matter, though. My fans deserve a piece of me.

When the last fan exits, I'm ushered into a smaller room that's set up interview style. Two leather chairs sit across from each other with a side table complete with a large leafy plant and knickknacks that are supposed to look pleasing to the camera.

Introductions are made and I find myself sitting across from the first interviewer of the night. No matter which network, magazine, or show they are from, the questions are always the same.

Syeda Glenn from *Entertainment Live* starts the interview with, “So tell me, Nash, your last tracks had a bit more nuance than on your previous albums. Are you foreshadowing what’s to come from Nash Hudson on your upcoming release?”

That’s a stupid-ass question I’ve been asked dozens of times. I give her the same rote, publicist-approved answer. “Absolutely. From my first album to the last, I want to take my fans on a journey of my evolving life. Through trial and experimentation, I’ve been able to settle into an area that seems to connect with my fans.

“My songwriting reflects this and now I can tap into music I really want to do. Sounds I want to produce and explore while taking you on a journey of highs just a bit heavier and lows just a bit quieter. Thought-provoking music that’s really, really good.”

She nods and checks her notes. “Do you have a favorite song on the new album? Maybe one that’s more personal for you?”

I do, but there’s no way in hell I’m telling the world about it. It’s a slow ballad, something I usually don’t do, but like I just said, my sound is evolving into music I want to do. The title is “Endless Regrets.” It’s an intimate take on my life and the one thing I wish I could go back and change.

Instead of laying my heart open for the masses, I go with, “Oh, man, that’s a loaded question for sure. Every song on this album hits a different part of me. From ‘Heartbeat of Thunder’ to ‘Sad, Sorry Me.’ But that might be from a selfish point of view.” I end with a grin aimed to get a chuckle from the interviewer. It always does.

“It seems like your lyrics of late reflect a symbolic search for home. Maybe not a home with an actual address, but a home within yourself.”

That question stops my breath because she hit too close to the truth. Nobody has picked up on that one single yearning I’ve been putting into more and more of my songs. And she’s right. It’s not a literal home. It’s a person. One particular person that will always be my true north and my homecoming.

The one I shouldn't have turned my back on so many long and lonely years ago.

The calm and assured smile on my face is automatic, masking my inner feelings. "I suppose it's from years spent on the road not knowing which city I went to bed in or woke up in. The hotel rooms that all look the same. I have no real sense of home, even though I have a house that's much too big for just me."

The only real home I ever knew was the one I grew up in with my parents. I haven't lived in that house since I was eighteen. Shortly after my first album dropped, I gave my parents a house. They chose to move to Florida and, while I visit them as often as I can, their new house has never felt like home. My house in California has never felt like home either. That house, the one featured in magazines and entertainment news shows on television, is no more than a statement of my success. I've never even been in the Olympic-size pool in the back yard. Hell, I haven't been in half the rooms, but they are all decorated on trend.

I haven't been back home to 4300 Baymount Drive since I left, even though I still own the house. I couldn't sell it. I have a service that sees to its upkeep, but it sits idle and silent.

Not for much longer.

The interviews continue until the final journalist asks the last question. I'm dead on my feet, but filled with an exhilaration at what's to come.

I was wrong about the time I'd finally be able to fall into bed. It's 4:36 in the morning when I land face first onto the hotel bed and pass out. There's a smile on my face and anxious anticipation in my heart because, for the next two weeks, "Nash Hudson, rock star" is going to disappear and Nash Hudson, small town boy-next-door is taking his place. You see, it's the Christmas season and I'm going home. Finally, I'm going to right a wrong or die trying. If I know McKenna Taylor, blood may figuratively be shed and punches—the verbal kind—will be thrown. Unless she's already married. If she is, I have nobody but my sorry self to blame.

CHAPTER TWO



MCKENNA

“What about the patchwork acid wash?” Robert, my assistant, asks.

The bag in question is on the design table in front of us, and the decision is easy. I can see the finished handbag in my mind. “Let’s go with silver or gunmetal hardware and have a leather pocket made up with our logo for the center front.”

Robert makes a few notes on his iPad. “You got it, boss. Anything else?”

The bag is a simple hobo style and doesn’t need much. The appeal is in its simplicity... and the pocket. “Don’t let them slack on the pocket stitching.”

With a dramatic gasp from my chief-of-everything assistant, he says, “I’m insulted you think I would allow that. Now get out of here.”

Checking the time, he’s right. I grab my things and, with a kiss to his cheek, I run for my car. I have an almost three-hour drive in front of me and during rush hour. I’ll be squeaking in at the last minute. I do feel a twinge of guilt for lying to Robert. He thinks I’m going to meet my mom for dinner, but that’s not where I’m going.

Scanning both directions first, I pull out of the parking lot behind our downtown storefront. I was lucky to find a space so close to home that fit my growing business, especially when I

added online sales. It's hard to believe we're already outgrowing the storage area, but I'm not ready to commit to a warehouse.

As I drive by the front of the store, I ignore the nauseating holiday decorations Robert insisted we needed. I also ignore the garland adorning each street pole and the festive shop windows. I especially ignore the town center with its huge Christmas tree and nativity scene. In two weeks, when the town's Christmas festival is in full swing, I'll avoid the downtown area at all costs. Attend the lighting of the tree ceremony? Not this girl. I'll be cuddled up in front of the fireplace, sans stockings, probably reading a fun sci-fi thriller that has nothing to do with the holidays or happily-ever-afters. I definitely won't be going to the Christmas Ball. I don't need the reminder of the night my luck changed, my heart broke, and my future took a sharp detour.

I don't like the holidays and I don't decorate or participate. Not anymore. I used to count the days until Thanksgiving because the day after turkey day we'd start the week-long process of decorating not only my parents' house, but also my dad's shoe store. Our tree had a different theme each year and I loved coming up with creative new ideas. Every flat surface of our house held something Christmas-y. Outside, we'd create a magical wonderland. Again, always themed and very well-lit with colorful Christmas lights. Each year, my dad would add a new blow-up character. But then... Everything bad in my life happened during the holidays.

Robert and my mom have both tried interventions over the years. I don't care that they celebrate, just don't push the merriment on me. Before she went to live in a retirement home—which I might add was her decision—my mom continued to put up a tree with all the trimmings. I'd avoid the living room and cry in my room. She finally realized how sad the decorations made me and each year cut back on her displays. When she moved, I insisted she take Christmas with her.

Tonight, I'm doing something I started torturing myself with years ago. A self-inflicted punishment-slash-guilty pleasure of sorts. Merging onto the highway, I plan to stop at

the first rest area to change clothes. Doing so at work would have sent a red flag to Robert. My silk blouse and black tweed slacks won't cut it where I'm going. I brought a pair of distressed black jeans and a retro AC/DC t-shirt with a bling-bling leather jacket to keep the winter weather at bay. Of course, the fashionable black leather, silver and rhinestone-studded skull bag perfectly pulls the look together. The bag—called Jessica the Rocker Girl—is a best seller. Yes. My own design.

Once I'm inside, I'll probably ditch the jacket to keep from overheating. Not that I'm going to be jumping around and screaming like a teenager. At least I hope I won't, but past experience shows that I will. There's a gamut of emotions I go through every single time. First there are tears, then my heart rips open, and then I'm simply happy for the friend I once knew. The one that promised to keep in touch. The one that I thought wanted more. *That* best friend.

As kids, and no siblings, Nash and I were inseparable. We played together as children, attended the same small-town school, and were next door neighbors. The one thing he never was, was my boyfriend. What we had together went deeper than a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. We told each other everything. I knew the first kiss he had was with Evelyn Mead and he knew mine was with Barry Bartlet. We knew each other's dreams. He wanted to write and play music, and I wanted to take the design world by storm. I suppose we both achieved our dreams in some respect.

I was the one that signed him up for the *America's Star* show. He always said his type of music wouldn't appeal to the masses and he didn't want to be humiliated when he didn't make it past round one of the competition.

I grin and put my signal light on to pass a slow-moving truck. Nash made it past the first elimination alright. He made it all the way to the end and then won the title of America's Star and a recording contract.

After he won, I never really saw him again. It was like the past eighteen years of our friendship never happened. He didn't call, he didn't come home to see his parents. Instead he

bought them a house in Florida and then I didn't see them anymore either. Our families were not only neighbors, we were close and did everything together. Celebrations, holidays, ballgames, or just our standing every Thursday night dinner. Then the entire Hudson clan disappeared from my life.

For years, I was angry with him, but also extremely proud. Mostly, I was hurt. I'm a little embarrassed by the fact that I scour the internet for any scraps of information I can find on Nash Hudson. His road to fame wasn't an easy one, but he made it. Three years into his career, his name was tied to two different women. The first was a supermodel and then, a few years later, a popular actress. Nothing ever came of those relationships and I breathed a sigh of relief when they ended. Then there was an incident with his Uncle Frank, but any mention of it quickly disappeared from social media.

Back in his early years, his uncle had tried for a career in music, but never made it past playing in bars. In my opinion, Frank saw an opportunity to latch on to fame and made himself Nash's representative. I don't know whose best interest Frank truly had at heart. Probably his own. Hopefully, Nash realized that and kicked him to the curb.

I never liked Frank, even before he warned me to stay out of Nash's life. As if I'd ever do anything to jeopardize his chance at success. I wanted that for Nash as much as he did.

After parking, I use the rearview mirror to touch up my makeup and fluff my golden blonde hair, letting it fall around my shoulders and halfway down my back. My hair is very confusing. Is it brown? Maybe blonde? Then there's a sorrel red mixed in. Most people think I pay high dollars for a professional highlighting. Nope. It's all me. I've often thought of cutting it. A shorter style would be a lot less work. The reason I never have isn't one I want to look at too closely.

I make my way into the coliseum just as the opening act finishes. While they change the set, I run to the bathroom and then find my seat. I feel so old, surrounded by teenagers in what I call "street walker" clothes. Did I ever dress that way? If I had, my mom and dad would have sent me right back upstairs to change. Hell, Nash would have had a cow if I'd

worn such suggestive outfits. I'd like to think it would have made him jealous, but now I know that wouldn't have been the case. He never felt that way about me.

Once the lights dim and the music ramps up, an announcer introduces the man of the night. And then there he is. My heart jumps and my eyes sting with unshed tears as I focus solely on the man in the middle of the stage and the music he creates. It's a few seconds before I realize I stopped breathing and take a gasp of air.

He's wearing his signature look of tight leather pants and a black button-up shirt with silver-studded skull and crossbones. His brown highlighted hair shimmers in the theatrical lighting and is long and loose, falling around his shoulders. He always wore his hair short when I knew him and didn't like if it even touched his neck in the back. More than once, he insisted I use his dad's clippers and trim his hair. I didn't do too bad a job, but then he didn't care if I did. Now his long locks have become his trademark and make women—and men—swoon.

I wish I could see his eyes clearly, but from my seat I can't look into their depths and know what he's feeling. Is he proud of all he's accomplished? Does he ever think of me? Hell, does he even remember me? I shy away from that answer because I think it's obvious he hasn't thought of me at all. If he had, I would have surely gotten at least a text message.

Every song he sings, I quietly sing along. I know them all. I listen to them all the time when I'm alone. When I get home, I'll relive everything that happened tonight and then tomorrow I'll wipe away every flutter of my heart and every time I thought the song he sang was about me.

But, for now, I'm living in the moment with Nash Hudson. We are at the same place at the same time and breathing the same air.

I need to stop putting myself through this turmoil. I know I should. I'm just not strong enough to give up our few times together. His tour goes on after the holidays, on the West Coast, but it doesn't matter. Tonight is ours.

Continuing to sing along with every song, I shed a few tears when the lyrics hit a nerve of longing within me.

At the end of the night, my feet and legs hurt from jumping and standing through the entire show. My throat is raspy from screaming his name like every other fan in attendance.

As I drive home, there are stars in my eyes from his beautiful talent. And to think we used to sit under a big oak tree in our back yards and I'd listen to him learn to play and sing for hours. The closer I get to home, the elation wanes and is replaced by confusion and distrust. How could I have gotten us so wrong?



The next morning, the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee has my eyes fluttering open. Did I set the timer on the coffee pot last night? No, I didn't. Which means...

I pull my robe on while stuffing my feet in my slippers and, after a brief trip to the bathroom, I make my way downstairs.

"Mom?" I ask from just inside the kitchen door. The table is prepared with two place settings and my stomach rumbles at the smell of the food warming on the stovetop.

"Hey, sweetie. You're sleeping late today."

How long has she been here? Long enough to make eggs, bacon, grits, hash browns, and pancakes. And coffee. Like a zombie, I head toward the life-saving brew. Mom hands me a mug from the cabinet and I take the pot and pour, add a teaspoon of sugar... and then one more. Mom sets the creamer beside me on the counter. I add the vanilla deliciousness until it's the right color, stir, and take a few needed sips before I reply. "Yeah, I didn't get in until late. Did I miss that we were having breakfast today?"

"No, we didn't have a breakfast date. Since I missed our dinner date last night, I thought I'd surprise you with

breakfast.”

The coffee mug stops halfway to my mouth and my eyes dart to hers.

She knows.

“Robert?” I ask, already sure of the answer.

Mom sits at the table and motions for me to join her. “Come eat before it gets cold. Don’t blame Robert. I called your cell and when you didn’t answer, I called the shop. Robert was under the impression you were meeting me for dinner. Don’t worry, I didn’t give you away.”

“Thanks.” I continue to sip, waiting for what I know is to come.

Mom gives a weary sigh. “Oh, honey, don’t you think I know you go on dates? You’re a grown woman with mature desires.”

I take a gulp of courage for the conversation ahead of me. It’s too hot and I burn the roof of my mouth. “Mom, I don’t want to have this conversation with you.”

She laughs and starts heaping food on our plates. “I was young once too, you know. There’s nothing wrong with having a booty call as long as you’re responsible. I would, however, like grandkids someday. Trish and I were talking the other day about the single state of our children.”

My head pops up. “You talk to Trish?”

She gives me an exasperated look. “Of course I do. We talk several times a week. But don’t change the subject. You’re not getting any younger. I have this friend, Evelyn, who has a son that would be just perfect for you. He visits every Saturday. Isn’t that nice of him? Why don’t you stop by one Saturday and meet him?”

I shudder at the thought of my mom fixing me up. I will be repulsed by it when I think of it again later, but first... all these years and Nash’s mom kept in touch with my mom, but not with me. “Why have you never told me that you talk to Trish?”

She shrugs and gives me an extra spoonful of grits. “Would you have wanted to know what was going on in their lives or heard news of Nash?”

She has me there, but I’m not going to admit that I crave any little mention of him. “I guess not.”

I get a raised brow for my inaccurate reply. My mom misses nothing. “I probably should have mentioned it, but then you started moving on and I didn’t want to send you back to that depressed place. I was concerned about you. Don’t worry. Trish says Nash never asks about us either. He’s just so busy. I’m sure that’s why.”

My back straightens with the resolve gained from yet again receiving proof Nash wants nothing to do with me. That’s it. I am never going to sneak off to one of his concerts again. I say that to myself, fully aware that’s a promise I can’t keep.

Doing what I’m good at, I push Nash Hudson down so deep there’s not a chance of him resurfacing. “Can we just enjoy our breakfast and not talk about the Hudson family?”

“We can, but I want to say this. That boy...”

I frown, looking up and directly at Mom. “Nash. You know his name is Nash.”

Her gaze softens, like my correcting her proved a sad point. “Give him a chance, dear. Let him explain.”

I push up from the table so quickly my chair slams into the floor with a large crash. “Me give him a chance? No. I was there. I waited and he didn’t show up. For ten years, he’s not shown up. He lost the chance even if he wanted one.”

Turning, I rush for the door, but pause when my mom calls out.

“Sweetie, I’m sorry you were hurt. All I’m saying is if the time ever arises, at least give him a chance.”

That’s when I see a poinsettia sitting on the kitchen island. Its stark red brightness a vivid contrast to the neutral tones of my home and heart. A rush of anger rises in my chest and I work to force a normal tone from my mouth. “I’m sorry I

raised my voice, Mom. Thank you for breakfast. Don't bother cleaning up; I'll take care of it and take the flower with you when you go."

Her arms surround me and I lean into her hug. I wish my mom could fix everything like she used to when I was little.

"Honey, if you can't forgive him then you need to let him go and move on with your life. If what you want is a husband and a family to fill this big old house, then stop waiting around for Nash to come to his senses."

I do want those things. I thought by my age I'd have them. If dreams could only be erased so easily. "I know, Mom. I know."

CHAPTER THREE



NASH

“This is crazy, Nash. You should be flying home with the rest of us and resting up for the next leg of the tour, not taking off on your own.”

All day there’s been one thing after another preventing me from leaving. My plan was to wake up and be on my way by eight. That would have put me there before noon. Unfortunately, my late night convinced my body it needed more than a few hours of sleep, and I didn’t wake up until eight. Then my publicist wanted time with me and Cory, my assistant, needed to fill me in on business and future scheduled events. I thought I was finally free to leave until Ford stopped me on my way out of the hotel with his pitch to forget about my plans and fly home with him. That’s not going to happen.

“Ford, you’re my agent, not my keeper. I have two weeks off from a grueling schedule I didn’t want in the first place. You’re the one that added dates to an already packed tour schedule. We were supposed to have four weeks off. But this, you don’t have a say in.”

He sighed and his lips thinned in disapproval, however not a shred of guilt showing. “I get it. You need time off and you’ll get it, but those extra dates are going to earn you several million dollars. That’s why you need to go home to California and recharge. Forget about this walk down memory lane.”

“And you’ll get a hefty chunk of change too,” I fired back. I’m not the naive schmuck I used to be when I first started in the business. Ford came in and cleaned up the mess my uncle made, which I appreciate, but his agenda has always been about the bottom line. Making my team work long hours to add ten additional concerts meant more money in his bank too. What he doesn’t know about are the bonuses I’ve already approved for everyone involved with the tour after we close. Even the truck drivers that transport my set from one venue to another will be seeing a life-changing amount in their last paycheck. Tay isn’t the only generous singer out there, but I’ve made it clear that NDAs are to be signed by each person receiving the bonus. I don’t want any light shone in my direction. That’s not the motive behind my decision. I want the people that work toward making me a success to be paid for their efforts. They are a stellar team.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t you hire me to make you money and to keep my hand out of the cookie jar? Never once have I given you any reason to not trust me. I have always looked out for your best interests. Unlike your uncle.”

He’s right, I have to give him that. He’s always been transparent and I’ve never questioned his honesty. After what my uncle did, it was a very long time before I could trust anyone completely. As completely as I can anyway. Like I said, I’ve wised up.

“I appreciate you, man. But the next two weeks belong to me. Go home to Cali and I’ll see you in Boston after New Year’s to work on the new tracks before we head out for the last leg of the tour.”

He sighs, shaking his head but accepting I’m not going to change my mind. “At least take security with you.”

I chuckle. Security is my last concern. “Nah, man. Where I’m going they don’t care who I am.”

The valet pulls up to the curb with my rental car and tosses me the keys. I slip him a fifty-dollar bill and nod at his enthusiastic, “Thank you very much, sir.”

“Have you talked to Renee? Does she know about this trip?” Ford asks.

I grind my teeth together to keep from snapping. “No. I don’t give a fuck about photo ops. There will be no angle thrown or social media posts. This trip is for me. To put it plainly, butt out. This is a private matter that doesn’t concern Nash Hudson, the rock star.”

Ford throws up his hands and backs off. “Fine. You know my number. Call if you need me. Or bail,” he says with a chuckle, but the tightness around the corners of his eyes gives away his worry about that very thing happening. “Did you have to rent such a shitty car?”

I laugh out loud and jog around to the driver’s side of the rental. I *could* have chosen something flashy, but what I need is something plain and simple that will blend in, and a dark gray Honda is perfect. There’s nothing wrong with the car. At one time, I would have given anything to have a car this nice. The beat-up truck I inherited from my dad when I turned sixteen needed more repairs than gas in its tank. But it got me places. Most times.

“I know it’s a stretch from what I normally drive, but it’s all I need.” Back home, I have a garage full of luxury cars and trucks that I rarely have time to drive. But not for much longer.

My career is changing. I can feel it in my bones. I want more. More of the music I want to produce with the messages I want to send. Not that I dislike what has come before, but I’ve changed and my music needs to reflect that or I will forever be stuck in the past.

Just like with my personal life. I want more. I’m almost thirty years of age and I’m nowhere near where I imagined myself being by this time in my life. Yes, I have enough awards and other forms of recognition to line an entire room, but I want something more, something different.

I want a home that feels like a home and someone I love to come home to or, better yet, to go on this incredible journey with me. And children. More than one. A little girl with curly hair in many shimmering colors and a little boy with jade

green eyes and a stubborn streak a mile wide. Even the thought brings a smile to my face.

It doesn't escape me the children I imagine look like their mother—the woman I want to be that mother.

I have a lot to answer for. She does too. I'm not the only guilty party with what went down on that Christmas Eve so many years ago.

I'm a few hours into the trip when my phone rings, jarring me from the place my thoughts were taking me. Smiling at the screen, I push the button on the steering wheel to connect the call. "Hey, Mom."

"Hello, dear boy. Are you there yet?"

I hear the waves in the background. She must be calling from the back deck. "That sound reminds me of the days we all used to load up the van and head to the beach with the Taylors."

She chuckles. "You were always asking how much longer. Such an impatient child. Not much has changed."

I return her laughter at my expense. "To answer your question, I'm about halfway there. I didn't get the early start that I had hoped."

"At least you're on your way. I had a dream last night that Ford added a last-minute concert to the schedule and our plans were ruined."

That has actually occurred so often, she has reason to be concerned. "I wouldn't have let that happen, Mom."

"I don't know what I'm more excited about. Spending Christmas with you or being back home."

"It's always been our home, hasn't it?"

"Sweetie, we love and appreciate the home we have now, but no, it's never felt like home to us."

I have always worried about that, even among their reassurances it was what they wanted. "I shouldn't have moved you to Florida."

“Well, why ever not? It’s where we told you we wanted to go. The warm weather has been good for your dad’s joints and I don’t miss shoveling snow. But I do miss the town and the people. I especially miss Christmas as our family.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. Our Christmases have been few and far between lately. I promise to do better.”

“You’re living your dream, Nash. Never be sorry or apologize for that. Now, remember we won’t be there until next week. I want you to get the house decorated. All the decorations are in the garage. You remember where we store them? Maybe you can get that sweet girl next door to help you.”

My mom is much too obvious in her casual observation. “I don’t know, Mom. I don’t even know if she lives there anymore. She may have moved away. The last time I saw her, she was headed to a New York design school. Maybe she’s moved to Paris and is a trending designer now.”

“Well, if you’d let me tell you...”

“No, Mom. I don’t want you to tell me. If I find out anything about McKenna, it’s going to be from her mouth.” The truth is that I have never felt like I deserved to know. Over the years, when my parents have tried to pass on news from back home, I’ve stopped them.

“Fine. You’ll be there soon and you’ll have your answers. Just promise me you’ll be patient and kind, no matter what you discover.”

That has me tipping my head in confusion at her cryptic reply. We talk a bit longer about the last concert and plans for the coming week before I hang up with more questions filling my head.

After a pit stop for gas, snacks, and a bathroom break, I get back on the road.

When my stomach’s growls become louder than the music playing in the car, I take an exit and go through a drive-thru. I pull my cap lower and put all the “southern” back into my voice that dialect coaches trained out of me when I order a

bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a Coke. Once my food is in hand, I pull into a parking space away from other cars and enjoy every single bite of my meal. My trainer would blow a gasket if he saw me wolfing down the burger.

With a paper napkin wipe to my mouth and greasy fingers, I get back on the highway and within the hour I'm exiting once again, but this time there are only forty-five more minutes until I'll be home. The landscape becomes familiar. I remember we always got apples from the Fisher's orchard in the fall. Their house is back from the road, but everything looks the same, even the sign they move close to the road to announce apple season.

There are new additions too. What once was a field where a bunch of us kids would play baseball is now a big box store. The diner we all went to after ballgames is gone and a strip mall is in its place.

As I near downtown, I slow as I drive under the strings of Christmas lights and garland. Sutter's Ridge always does Christmas on steroids and the leaders of the pack were always my mom and Mrs. Taylor, or mom number two as I always called her. Our homes were situated at the end of a cul-de-sac and could have lit up the entire town at night, there were so many decorations between the two houses.

Each year, my dad and Mr. Taylor had an unspoken but legitimate competition to see who could outdo the other. It was all in good fun and the memories are priceless. Mac and I were always their elves, helping to work Christmas magic. They were more the "tell us what to do and sit back and watch us do it" supervisors, offering backseat suggestions and directions.

As I make the turn into the neighborhood, the lack of lights and decorations are a surprise. A few houses have trees in their windows with flickering lights glowing. There are wreaths on doors, but the absence of grand outdoor displays leaves me clueless. And disappointed.

Where did Christmas go?

I expected to see a glow around the Taylor's house, but instead it's dark without a single twinkle or berry anywhere.

No flocked trees decorating the porch or blow-up snowmen on the lawn. There's not even a tree in the window. Did the Taylors move? That's the only explanation I have. My plans are quickly dissolving. Does Mom know? Why didn't she tell me they moved? Right. Because I wouldn't allow her to.

Pulling into the driveway, I get out to open the garage door since I don't have the remote. I park the car and shut the door before grabbing my duffle and guitar from the back.

With the flip of a switch, I fill the kitchen with light and a wave of nostalgia hits me hard. Everything is just as it was ten years ago. Mom took the things she wanted with her and left the rest. I didn't have the heart or see any reason to clean everything out. It's like a time capsule of my past.

The service I hired did a good job keeping everything clean and in good repair. The refrigerator is filled and there's ice cream in the freezer. Peanut butter cup, which is the most important flavor. I specifically asked for it to be stocked since I may need to use it for bait.

As I make my way down the hallway, I turn on lights and let myself live in the past. It's a good hour later before I make it to my childhood bedroom. I could take the master, but Mom and Dad will be coming in later and I'll insist they take that room.

I toss my bags on the bed, pull my clothes off, and head to the shower. It's late, much later than I'd planned. I'm road weary and exhausted from the schedule Ford pushed on us. A shower and bed, and then tomorrow I'll find out what's going on.

Everything goes to plan until I step out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my waist. A loud scream startles me, just before I look up and see a luscious, curvy, and jiggling figure rushing toward me welding a... baseball bat?

Even if I had time to react, my focus being on the incredible set of breasts swaying as she runs towards me, I'm not sure I would have been able to before the wooden bat makes contact with my head. I see stars and my legs slowly

sink to the floor just before I hear, “Oh, my God! Nash, is that you?”

And then...

CHAPTER FOUR



McKENNA

“Oh, no! I’ve killed Nash Hudson!” I cry out to absolutely no one. I’m the only conscious person in the house.

I fall to my knees and explore the goose egg quickly appearing on his head. I don’t find any blood, for which I say a silent prayer. I bend over and tap my hands against his face. “Nash. Come on, Nash. Wake up.”

He moans, muttering something like... *stomp*. Stomp what? “Please wake up!”

I pat harder. What do I do? I need to call the paramedics. I search the floor for my phone. I had it with me when I came over to investigate the lights in the Hudsons’s house. I noticed the cleaning service was there today and assumed they’d left the lights on.

The last person on earth I expected to find was Nash. Naked. And now I’ve killed him. Tears fall down my face as I beg him to wake up, tapping harder. “Come on, Nashy, wake up. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hit you.”

“Stop hitting me and I’ll be fine,” he mumbles, and I stop assaulting him on top of knocking him out. Maybe my taps were a bit...determined. I jump up and run to get a cushion to put behind his sore head.

“Here, let me help you.” Gently I lift his head and position the pillow, trying not to enjoy the silky feel of his hair against

my palms. He's had it highlighted. I remember him getting the same effect naturally in the summer from being out in the sun, especially after our annual family week at the beach.

He moans again and reaches up with one hand to touch the unicorn horn forming just beneath his hairline.

I gulp, my emotions closing my throat and making me sound like a crying chipmunk. "I'm sorry, Nash. I didn't know you were here. I saw the lights. I didn't mean to knock you out."

His eyes flicker open and I smile down into blue eyes as they work to focus on me. I can tell when he sees me. His lips pull into a grin. "Hey, Fluttercup. I see you've been working on your swing. Much improved, I'd say. But you didn't knock me out. It takes more than that little love tap to put my lights out. You just took me by surprise, is all."

My stomach quivers from his use of a nickname I haven't heard in years. He always said I could never stay still. I had to flutter around from one thing to another all the time. I brush his hand away and lean in closer to get a better look. The swelling has stopped. That's a good thing, right? "I'm sorry, Nash. You came out of the bathroom and surprised me too. I just reacted."

He made an attempt to chuckle, but ended up groaning. "Next time I'll alert the neighbors that I'm home. In my own house. You know, so I'm not attacked again."

His offhanded comment is like a bucket of cold water poured over my head. He put me in my rightful place as a neighbor. Nothing more. Like I haven't taken it on myself to look after his house every single day since he deserted me. Like we didn't grow up in each other's homes. Like we weren't... No. Not going there. My chin tips upward as I turn his head loose and push to my feet.

"Ouch!" he cries and I wince, but refuse to feel guilty when his head falls back against the pillow with too much *plop*.

“Wait.” He grabs my wrist and I collapse back down on my ass beside him. Not the most graceful move I’ve ever made.

He isn’t holding me tightly and I could easily break the hold he has on me. Later, I may examine why I didn’t. I look into the man’s face I thought I’d never see again and ask coldly, “What are you doing here?”

He doesn’t try to look away from the hold of our gazes. “This is my home, Mac.”

His flippant answer angers me further. “Why are you remembering that now?” I snap.

“Ouch. Those barbs went deep.” He grins and those same shivers I used to get from his attention make themselves known.

“Let me go, Nash.” Immediately he turns me loose and a blast of loss filters through my heart. That’s when I notice he isn’t wearing any clothes and the towel that he has on is gaping open. Wide open. Like I can see he’s been circumcised. His...you know...is beautiful. My heart races and my nipples alert me to the instant attraction I feel toward the man laid out before me in all his glory. I should look away.

And I will. I need to look away.

I lean forward for a better look. He’s long and thick with a purple vein extending down the underneath. My eyes bug out. Is he starting to...

With a gasp, I sit back on my knees. He is. That does it. My eyes dart upward and I find his gaze glued to my chest. I look down and grimace. I came out in only my white tank and sleep shorts that have seen better days. I didn’t even put a robe on. It’s freezing outside, so of course I’m chilled—and turned on—and my nipples are broadcasting that fact. I couldn’t be advertising the goods any clearer.

That’s not the only problem. I always hoped if I ever did see Nash again, it wouldn’t be without makeup on and my hair gone wild after a hard day spent at home bent over my drawing table. I haven’t even had a bath. I bet I have raccoon

eyes. Do I stink? I fight the reaction to raise my arms and smell my pits.

Abort! Abort! My inner diva shouts. I scoot back trying to get my feet beneath me and into a standing position.

“Be sure to put ice on that bump. And take a couple of acetaminophens,” I say as I back away, turn, and flee.

“Wait, Mac, don’t go,” he calls out, but I’m already flying out the side door, and I don’t stop until I’m in my own house with the door locked and staring in the bathroom mirror at the vision of a flushed woman who’d just had her world rocked by none other than Nash Hudson, rock star.

That silly woman gawking back scares me. Not only for reacting physically to the handsome man or for sticking around as long as I did. What frightens me most is the spark of hope I find in the depths of her eyes.

“Nashton is back,” I announce to the towels hanging between the vanity and shower. While the world may know him as Nash, he will always be Nashton or, at particularly flirty moments, Nashy to me. Once he entered the contest, his PR people gave birth to Nash Hudson. My lips firm and straighten in anger at his comment belittling our relationship. His *neighbor*. I huff out a sad and desperate laugh.

I’m nothing to him.

Banging at my back door makes me do a jump-scare. I rush to the hallway just in time to hear, “Come on, Mac. Let me in!”

Nash shouts and bangs some more. “I know you hear me. Open the door, Mac.”

In a juvenile move, I stomp my foot on the hardwood floor, do an about-face, and march back into the bathroom where I shut the door, turn on the shower, and stick my head under the water effectively ending any chance I might give in to answering the door.

The water is turning cold by the time I realize I’m still in my PJs. “Args! The man infuriates me.”

I end up doing a load of laundry, including my soaked pajamas. Even after the tiring and emotional day I had, I still can't get to sleep. My gaze keeps going to the window. Nash's bedroom is right across from mine. I roll over and punch my pillow. He's probably sleeping in the primary bedroom, putting him on the opposite side of the house.

Turning over again, I spread my arms and legs, staring up at the ceiling, willing myself to sleep. After another hour, my feet hit the floor.

"I might as well get some work done," I grumble as I head to my studio.



Sunlight pouring in the window wakes me the next morning. When I lift my head, a sharp pain radiates up my neck no doubt caused by sleeping bent over my drawing table. I wipe away slime on the side of my face where I drooled in my sleep. "Gross."

The clock on my desk flashes 9:30. "Oh, my God! I'm late!"

Why didn't Robert call when I didn't show at eight? We have buyers coming in at noon and we need to set up a display. My head falls down to the table with a loud *bam* of frustration.

I rush around grabbing my things and stuffing them into my travel bag for work. Sprinting to the bedroom, I pull out a dark brown mid-length skirt, and my hand thankfully lands on a brown with rust and deep red paisley blouse. I pull it on and shove my feet into brown leather boots.

I take a few minutes to brush my hair, which looks like a rat's nest from not drying it after my shower last night. I use water and twist it into a bun, and that's about as good as it's going to get. A light makeup, and I pull on my wine wool coat. Tugging my briefcase and handbag, both my designs, up onto my shoulders, I quickly head for the door already planning and organizing what I need to do since I lost so much time.

First, I need to call...

“Damn, my phone.” I need to call Robert. I feel around in my handbag and come up empty. I rush back to my office and perform a military grade fact-seeking mission. Nothing. The bedroom. Nothing. The bathroom. The kitchen. Like a crazed lunatic, I run into the den even though I never went in there last night. Again, nothing. “Args!”

I make myself pull it together and take a calming breath. There. That’s better. Now... “When was the last time I used my phone?”

Scrolling back through my evening, I blow out a harsh breath and glare out the window at the house next door. Last night. I had it when I went over to investigate the lights at the Hudson’s. Nash has my phone and is probably grinning like a loon because he knows I’ll have to come get the darn thing.

The clock on the den wall shows I’m now hours late. What is Robert thinking? Has he sent out a search party to look for me? I hope he set up the display without me. This is our first big-time buyer. Getting their business would mean selling in a very well-known store in New York. That could be the boost we need to go national or even, dare I say, global.

Screw the phone. I’m going to work. I grab my bag, digging for my keys as I head to the garage door. Unfortunately, by the time I’m standing in the garage, my keys are missing too and I know where they are as well. Probably sitting beside my phone under Nash’s gleeful attention.

That does it. I storm through the house, exit the back door, and march right up to the Hudson’s back door. I only hope he’s still sleeping as I raise my hand to pound on the door.

My fist doesn’t make contact before the door is thrown open by a handsome, smirking man with a mean-looking purple bump on his forehead. I try not to wince at the visual or ask how he’s feeling this morning. It’s his fault for scaring me!

“Well, hello, Mac. It’s lovely of you to visit. Come in, I have coffee on and I know what a bear you are before your first cup.”

I fake a smile, more of a sneer, and reply, “No, thank you. I just need my phone and keys.” Wafting notes of coffee tickle my nose and I breathe the aroma in. Coffee would be a lifesaver about now. Probably Nash’s.

I hold out my hand, but the man only shakes his head with a much too innocent grin.

“I’m not sure I’ve seen them. Would you like to come in and search?” He stands aside.

Eying him suspiciously, what choice do I have, and I bolt past him and do a quick onceover of the kitchen and the hallway where the, um, incident happened. I don’t let myself think about the glorious sight of Nash splayed out on the floor. Nope. I’m not going there.

Frustrated and now even *more* late for work, I return to the kitchen where I find Nash at the breakfast table with two cups of coffee and two plates of eggs, bacon, toast, and fresh fruit. Cantaloupe, honeydew, and grapes, I think. My stomach growls. And right in the middle of the table sit the two objects of my desire.

With my hands on my hips, I hit him with a fuming glare. “Why didn’t you tell me you have my phone and keys? Why did you let me look for them if you already had them? Do you know how late I am?”

He starts to open his mouth to reply, but I’m incensed. He’s playing games with my life, a life he wanted no part of. A life that I’ve struggled to find some measure of success in. “Some of us have to work for a living and don’t have the privilege of having everything done for us. We have responsibilities and people depend on us. Oh, right. I forgot I’m talking to you. You have no problem breaking promises.”

My chest is heaving as I finish saying my piece and Nash’s expression only hardens.

“Are you finished with your rant?” he asks too calmly, as if my stress doesn’t matter to him which further enrages me.

“Args!” I start to grab my things and leave, but Nash covers them with his hand. A jolt of lightning goes up my arm

from his touch, and I jerk my hand away. This is not the time to be turned on by a man out to ruin me.

“Mac, sit down and take a breath,” he says evenly.

I cross my arms and glare. “I can’t. I’m late for work and I have a very important meeting I need to get ready for. I’m already late because of you.”

He chuckles. “I’m not sure how you came to that conclusion, but no, you don’t have a meeting today. Your phone rang this morning. That’s how I found it. Thinking someone might be worried if you didn’t answer, I did. Answer it, that is.”

My arms drop to my sides and my eyes widen. “You didn’t!”

He nods, unfazed, and continues, “I did. Some French guy named Rowbear called. He wanted you to know that the meeting for today was cancelled and rescheduled for the first of the year. Evidently someone in the group is sick.”

All the frantic, irritated steam leaves my body and my butt plops down in the chair. I was really counting on that meeting going well. It will just take longer to get my foot in the door. That’s fine. No problem.

Damn it.

With a shaking hand, I lift the cup to my lips and drink as deeply as I can. My eyes close as the delicious dark roast, sweet, creamy flavor bursts on my tongue. Perfectly the way I like it. That, however, I’m not going to mention, thank him, or admit to myself. I swallow before addressing the smugly grinning man on the other side of the table.

“His name is Robert and he’s from Cleveland, Ohio. His alter personality is *Rowbear*, the French pronunciation for Robert. He only pulls Rowbear out when he feels nervous or defensive,” I explain, but why I care to is beyond me.

“That’s weird.”

Taking another sip, I agree, “Yes, it is, but he’s saved my butt many times and if it makes him happy to slip into

Rowbear, then so be it. He's an amazing assistant. What did you do to put his defenses up?"

"Nothing. I said hello. He demanded I put you on the phone. I told him you weren't available. I mean, I didn't know if he was a husband, boyfriend, or what, so I introduced myself—"

In that moment, my world crashes and burns. "Oh, no," I interrupt, feeling the rumble of the freight train that's barreling toward me. "You didn't. Please tell me you didn't tell him you're Nash Hudson."

He pins me with a confused look. "Who else should I have been? Anyway, after that, he was more than happy to spill about the meeting. He said to take the day off and he'd handle the shop. In fact, he said you should take the week off."

With my elbows on the table, my head lands in my hands in despair. This isn't good. "You don't realize what you've done. Robert is your biggest fan. I'll never hear the end of this."

Robert will be relentless in his pursuit of information and an in-person meeting where he will gush, and touch, and make over Nash like the rock star he is. But it won't stop there. He'll be able to smell my attraction to Nash, and he'll figure everything out. Everything. This is bad. Really, really bad.

"So what do you want to do today?"

His casual question has my head popping up. "Huh? I'm going to work."

"But you have the day off and I need help. Mom and Dad are coming in next week for Christmas and she wants me to have everything decorated before they get here. You know that stuff isn't my thing. I need help decorating. You know, like we used to do. You tell me what to do and I do it."

A cold, desolate feeling engulfs me at the mention of decorating and from the memory of how we used to be so close... and then we weren't.

I grab my phone and keys. I'm outta here. There's no way I'm getting into my reasons for becoming a Scrooge. "Sorry,

you're out of luck. I don't do that anymore.”

“Don't do what?” he asks.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I say just before closing the door and heading to my garage. I might as well get this over with. Robert is going to be salivating for me to spill the tea. I'd like to spill an entire pot of tea—over Nash's head for telling Robert who he is and that he had my phone. I know exactly how good Robert is at math. He's going to add one plus one and get a thousand and one reasons why I should jump all over Nash Hudson.

CHAPTER FIVE



NASH

Well, that didn't go as I'd hoped. I dry the last of the glassware and toss the dishcloth on the counter. I knew breaking through Mac's defenses wasn't going to be easy. The girl I knew could hold a grudge like a pro. I expected the woman to also.

What did she mean by she doesn't do that anymore? She doesn't do Christmas? I can't believe that. She lived the rest of the year just to celebrate the holidays.

My guitar stares at me from across the room reminding me that I should be working on new songs for an upcoming album, but that's not going to happen until I get answers. I bypass the room entirely and take a quick shower before throwing on a pair of dark blue jeans with a vintage Eagles t-shirt.

I need information and since the woman herself has closed down communication, the only place I know to get it is from the people that live to bend an ear or two. The town is small and boasts a love of knowing everyone's business. I've been gone for years, but that can't have changed. I grab my leather coat and pull it on while picking up my keys and locking the door behind me.

The bell above the door of The Friendly Fork sounds off in C-sharp when I walk inside. The familiar woman with a coffee pot in one hand and a stack of menus tucked beneath her other arm smiles widely. "Well, as I live and breathe. Nashton

Hudson. It's been awhile since you've been in. And why is that? This is your home, boy."

She had always made me feel like a misbehaving child. She still does. "Hey, Mrs. Michaels. Sorry about that. I just got into town and you're my first stop. I wouldn't even think of going anywhere else first."

Her brow rises almost into her gray hairline, letting me know she doesn't buy my bull for a moment. "Go take a seat and I'll bring you your regular."

This time I give her a skeptical look. "Really? I can't believe you remember."

Her answer is a harrumph and the squish of her orthopedic shoes as she breezes by me on her way to the kitchen to put my order in. I have no idea how old Mrs. Michaels may be. She was old when I was a kid and came in for burgers and a milkshake and later when Mac and I would come on non-dates. That was a stupid label. They *were* dates, but she never would admit that.

Looking around, I notice the place hasn't really changed. The floor has been replaced with what looks like an identical green and gold linoleum. A few of the booths have been upholstered with newer-looking burgundy vinyl. My gaze lands on a picture above the register and I can't stop the wide-ass grin growing on my face.

Mrs. Michaels places a soda on the table, along with a red plastic basket holding a big, overstuffed burger and fries.

"Yep, that's right." She nods toward the picture. "And you're going to sign it before you leave here. We're right proud of your success. We like telling people we knew you when you were a snot-nosed boy coming in here with your first girlfriend."

My first and only, in my opinion. "I'll be happy to sign it. Thank you. I might not have shown it over the years, but this place has always been home to me. And not just the town, but the people that always made me feel like I belonged and that believed in my dream of making music."

She huffs out a laugh. “Thank goodness you had talent. We all knew it, even back then. Where’s that girl of yours?”

“Mac? Well...”

She cackles, and shakes her head, the poufy gray hair on top waving back and forth. “She probably won’t give you the time of day. That’s to be expected with the way you treated her. I’m a mite mad at you myself.”

See? All the business. “I’m trying, Mrs. Michaels. Any chance you could tell me where to find her?”

She looks down her nose at me and smirks. “Well, I could. But seems like a person that left another person should have to work a bit for answers. On the other hand, you being a clueless man and all, you could probably use some help. All I can say is to eat this burger and head down Main Street. You might find what you’re looking for.”

I should take offense with her comment, but I’m too curious to not only eat the burger, but to also discover what she’s talking about on Main Street.

The first bite of my bacon double cheeseburger with extra pickles is like a blast from the past. I close my eyes and savor the taste and the memories. I literally expect to see Mac across from me stealing my fries and kicking me every chance she gets under the table, and then denying it was her.

Several other people I remember from my younger days stop by to chat before I’ve eaten the last of my food. I debate the tip. The food total is less than ten bucks. I could drop a few hundreds on the table, but that would be an insult to Mrs. Michaels instead of the boon I’d intended. I could probably get away with fifty, but even that would be like a slap in the face to her. I settle on dropping thirty dollars on the table and stop by the counter to sign the picture she has hanging on the wall.

The picture was printed from a computer and probably gotten online from one of my concerts. I make a note to have Cory send me a glossy. Hell, maybe I can even get Mrs. Michaels to stand still for thirty seconds and take a selfie.

Walking down the sidewalk is not totally a visit to my past. Few stores remain of the ones I remember. New businesses have taken their place, which is good to see. There's nothing sadder than a town that isn't thriving. By the traffic, both on the road and sidewalk, I'd say there's no chance of big box stores taking revenue away from the locals.

I've forgotten how normal it is to be by myself without a horde of people vying for my time or wanting something from me. For the last decade, I've been *on*. I've been Nash Hudson, rock star, going from tours, interviews, promotions, and sponsors wanting a piece of me too. I've forgotten what it's like to sit in my own skin and do what I want when I want without having a schedule to follow.

Being back in Sutter's Ridge for only two days has already brought a calmness to my soul. A much-needed peace with the tour winding down and my label expecting me to spit out a dozen chart-topping songs for my next album. When the hell have I had time? There's been no opportunity to allow inspiration to bleed through. I push all those thoughts away and soak in the town around me as I continue my walk.

There's a gift shop where the dry cleaners used to be. The window is beautifully decorated for Christmas using a red and gold theme. There are a couple of new restaurants that I hope I get to try while I'm here. A bookstore, Turn the Page, is festive with every holiday book imaginable dressing its windows. And then, near the end of the street, is a store unlike all the others. It's located where Hanson's department store used to be. Every August, Mom would bring me to get new shoes and clothes for school. I hated every minute of those shopping sprees, but now I'm glad I have the memories of spending time with my mom. We'd always go to the ice cream shop afterwards and I'd get a scoop of cookie dough and a scoop of mint chocolate chip. They are my two favorite flavors and I never could decide between the two. Mom would get a scoop of chocolate in a cup, complaining she didn't need the extra calories of the waffle cone.

I walk closer and stop in front of the huge windows that used to advertise all the stylish outfits available inside in hopes

of enticing passersby to come in and buy something.

One thing that makes the window displays stand out now is the lack of holiday merriment. There's only one sad fake tree with a strand of popcorn wrapped around it and three red plastic ornaments. Maybe they don't celebrate the holidays. It shouldn't matter that they don't go all out like the other businesses. Or the entire town. I'm surprised the Haviland sisters let the store off the hook like this, though. They always kept everyone on their toes when it came to managing the town.

Then I'm blown away by the inventory on display. At least the things I can see from the window. I push the door open and step inside for a closer look. Handbags, backpacks, totes, belts, vests, and so much more and all of the creative designs are made from what looks like recycled denim jeans. I'm a guy and a woman's purse isn't something I've ever had an interest in or noticed for that matter. But not everything in here is gender-based.

I pick up a striped denim messenger bag that I'd use to carry my laptop and sheet music without hesitation. Then there's a woven denim bag with stitching that's incredibly detailed. My mom would love it.

“Welcome to Blue Rose.”

With the bag in hand, I glance up to find a thin, dark-haired man approaching from a back room. His voice is strangely familiar. The man in question stops mid-stride. His mouth drops open, and then he squeals like a teenage girl while waving his arms wildly as he sprints toward me.

“Oh, my God! Oh, my God! It's him. I mean you're you. I mean, you're Nash Hudson! Did you know you're Nash Hudson? You're here. In my shop! In person! I mean, when we spoke on the phone, I doubted you were who you said you were. But now, here you are!”

Ah, yes, Rowbear minus his French accent. I've had some memorable fan meetings and some I'd like to forget, but this is certainly one of the most enthusiastic ones. “Hey, yes, I'm Nash, but I'd like to keep that quiet, if you don't mind.”

“Oh, of course.” He lowers his voice dramatically and zips an invisible zipper over his mouth and tosses the key away. “Any chance I could get a selfie? Just for me. I promise not to share on social media, no matter how much it would help the shop.”

He whips his phone out and snuggles in close to my side and snaps away like a print model seeking the best angle and pose. Having enough, I physically peel myself off him. Putting a few feet between us, I comment, “This is an incredible store. Where do you get your inventory from? It’s very unique.”

“Our girl, McKenna. She designs it all. Don’t you know about her going viral on the Tickety Tocker?”

Everything he just said is Greek to me other than this is Mac’s store. I look at everything through a different lens, and I can see her hand in every single detail. This must have been what Mrs. Michaels meant. “Why don’t you tell me about it?”

He eyes me suspiciously. “Didn’t you spend the night with McKenna? Why don’t you know this? It’s pretty basic. I know you two used to be neighbors, but why hasn’t she mentioned you if you’re that into her? There’s no way she could keep something like this a secret from me.”

I shrug like I haven’t a clue before pointing out, “I had her phone, didn’t I? What can I say, we had other things to discuss.” Mac would not like the implication, but I’ll use whatever.

That seems to appease him enough to continue. “Right. Well, she had to quit school, and then when she lost her father’s shoe store—”

My breath is sucked right out of my lungs. “She quit school? But she was going to some big-name design school in New York. You mean she didn’t go? Why? What happened?”

His gaze narrows. “You know, when her father died, she had to quit school to run his store. She lasted about two years before she had to close the doors.”

My heart skips beats trying to make sense of what I’m hearing. McKenna’s dream was to go to design school and

travel abroad to Paris and intern with some of the world's most famous designers. For the years I've been gone, that's where she's been. At least in my mind, she's been burning up the fashion world. Guilt neck-deep threatens to drown me. This is what my mom has been trying to tell me for so long and I wouldn't allow even a mention of McKenna. "How did this happen?"

"She needed a way to make money. She started going to second-hand clothing stores and donation centers and collected all the used denim clothing she could find. She pieced together a tote bag and sold it to a friend. Then, by word of mouth, she started getting orders. But she really gained success when she turned the camera on and posted her creative process on social media. She trended overnight and the orders started really pouring in."

With a grin, I nod. That so sounds like Mac. Digging deep when she had no choice. Suddenly I'm feeling as if I shouldn't be here. I'm not sure if I should be here in Mac's shop or if I should even be in Sutter's Ridge. I rub my chest in the area of my heart.

I let her down.

Where was I while she was going through what sounds like hell? An angry burst flares alive. Why didn't she reach out? She had to know I would have helped her in any way I could. As soon as that thought hits, another takes its place. Why did it have to be up to her to reach out? I should have known.

I knew her father died. I remember I had Cory send flowers. I'd just started my first world tour and I'd asked to reschedule two dates so I could attend the funeral, but the powers that be denied my request. I should have checked in with Mac. I should have been here. I should have done more.

"Where is McKenna anyway?" Robert asks.

My brows pull together in confusion. "She's not here?"

He shakes his head and he gazes back at me, suspicion returning. "No. I assumed she was still with you when she

didn't come in and I found out, you know, that she... was with you."

"No. She left. I thought she was coming to work."

Where are you, Mac? Running?

Robert pulls out his phone and types in a message. In only a few moments, he reads the reply and nods. "She's fine."

"Where is she?" I ask, hoping it will be that easy to find her.

Robert's chin tips. "I don't think I should tell you. She's where she can process. Which means you aren't as close as you led me to believe. As much as I love your music, McKenna has my loyalty and always will."

"I'm glad she has someone like you on her side. Someday I want to hear how you two met and started working together. But, for now, I need to go find her. I have a lot to make up for. More than I even knew."

Just before I reach the door, Robert calls out, "If you hurt her again, you'll have to answer to me."

Fighting a grin at the preposterous image of the wimp taking me down, I nod with all seriousness. "Hurting Mac is the last thing I want to do."

I jog to my car and head west out of town. I know where she is. Where we always went when we needed to think or simply get away for a few moments of clarity. There's a trail that leads to a lookout point of sorts. The view is of the lake with a range of mountains in the background, a perfect place to sit with your thoughts or to write a song.

After pulling over, it doesn't take me long to walk the short trail to the overlook. When she comes in sight, I pause and allow myself a few stolen moments to simply soak her in. She's gorgeous... and obviously upset.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot."

She looks over, not surprised at finding me here. "There is no right foot when it comes to you and me. Go away, Nash."

How much clearer do I need to say get lost? I don't want you here. You don't belong here."

She's closed off. Her defenses are higher than the mountains before us. If I push, she'll only shut down more. I take a seat on the bench, being careful to leave plenty of room between us. "You're wrong, Mac. This town is the only place I feel like I do belong."

She huffs out a disbelieving bark. "Uh-huh. Your past behavior proves something else."

There's no way I'm going to win this round because she's right. It hasn't been my choice to stay away, but that's no excuse. "Here's the thing. My mom and dad are coming in next week. They are both excited to spend Christmas here. I have regrets about that. When I offered to build them a house, I never expected them to pick Florida instead of Sutter's Ridge."

"I always wondered why they left. Your mom said it was your dad's health."

"That's right. He's not had the joint pain and breathing issues since living in a warmer climate, so I guess the move worked. What I didn't realize is how much they miss it here. I should have clued into that a long time ago. Maybe that's why I've held onto their house. I should have given them the option to fly up here at least during the summer months. That's on me."

She doesn't offer any response, leaving me to conclude she thinks I should have been a better son too. "Anyway, I want to give them the best Christmas ever. I need your help to do that. I don't understand why you're against helping me, but can't you push our differences aside for my parents? Help me give them this?"

Her lips thin and she looks out at the view. I don't have much hope of her agreeing. I'm playing dirty using the guilt card to get her to say yes and I should feel bad about that, but I don't. I'll use whatever means I need to in order to work things out with Mac.

It's a long time coming, but she finally says, "Fine. I'll help, but you get the tree and don't tick me off or I'm outta there."

Not going to happen, sweetheart. "Thanks! Sure, no problem. I can order a tree or I'll go to the new Walgrams outside of town and get one of those that already have lights on it. White lights, right?"

The look of revulsion on her face has me biting the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. Do I know my girl or what? Everything may not be the same, but some things will never change.

"You have got to be kidding me. You know the tree has to be freshly cut. And you have to pick out a good one. No bare spots or leaners, and the needles need to be fresh and not crunchy. And by all that's holy... white lights? No. Multi-colored lights. And your mom should have boxes of them in the attic above the garage. Unless they don't work anymore. We'll need to test them before using them."

I cross my arms and enjoy the excitement growing on her face as she chastises me. She may think she's through celebrating the holidays, but I see proof that there's still that spark of the girl I knew inside her. There's also that same underlying spark between us. I go for broke, "Have you ever wondered what it would be like?"

She turns, our eyes connect. She doesn't need to ask my meaning—she knows. I move closer, needing her sole focus so I can gauge the truth of her response. Will she brave it all and answer honestly? Or is she so mad at me she's going to make me suffer by lying?

"Yes," she says breathlessly, staring at me with so much longing it breaks my heart. Her eyes move to my lips and I couldn't have stopped my forward movement even if I had second thoughts that this may be too soon or not the perfect time for such a monumental first.

A few more inches and I pause, waiting for her reaction. She closes the space between us and our lips touch in a whisper-soft kiss filled with the promise of possibilities. It's

no more than the flutter of hummingbird wings, but it's enough to leave us breathless. It's a kiss of innocence and what should have been.

After the kiss, an awkward silence grows thick between us. Then I see a grin pulling gently at her lips just before she starts back down the trail, calling over her shoulder, "Come on."

I follow by her side, a familiar position. "Where are we going?"

"It's takes an hour to get to Wagoner's Christmas tree farm. We'll have just enough time to get there and back before dark. Then we'll start decorating first thing in the morning."

I'm glad she's looking ahead and misses the smirk on my face. With that one kiss, her fate is sealed. McKenna Taylor was always meant to be mine.

CHAPTER SIX



MCKENNA

I kissed Nash. My stomach feels like a thousand butterflies are flapping around inside. How did I get myself into this? I have been asking myself that very question since we dropped my car off at home and started up the mountain to Wagoner's. I need to forget that kiss and chalk it up to insanity, a weak moment, or a desperate desire to see if the real thing could be as wonderful as I always dreamed. The answer is no. It was even better.

“Do you want to stop for apples on the way up or wait until we're headed home?”

My spine stiffens at his question and tears begin to sting the back of my eyelids. This is why I don't do this crap anymore.

Oh, but he's not finished going down memory lane. “Do you remember the year your dad didn't tie the trees well enough and they both blew off as we were driving home?” he says with a chuckle. “I'll never forget the way your mom looked when they fell over the edge of the road and cartwheeled down the mountain.”

I want to put my hands over my ears and demand he stop talking. Those memories hurt too much to pull out of the well-sealed box in my heart.

“We all turned around and went right back up the mountain and had to go through the painful, never-ending process of picking two more perfect trees. We didn’t get home until after dark. Oh, wait, that’s also the year you were helping me unload the trees and broke a limb.”

My eye twitches. “I didn’t break it. You turned it loose before I had it and it fell and broke.”

He shrugs like it doesn’t matter. It did then and it still does. “Same thing. You’re the reason it broke. Your mom had to hide the bald spot in a corner of the room instead of placing the tree in front of the window.”

My lips quirk with annoyance. At the classic Nashton response. “I dropped it because you weren’t paying attention when I said I didn’t have it. You should have waited a few seconds until I had a good grip. Besides, I liked the tree in the corner of the room. There was more room for presents.”

“Isn’t that the year we had the Phase 10 marathon? We played for twelve hours straight. We could have played for another twelve hours and I still would have won.”

I bark out a laugh. “You are delusional. You didn’t win. I did, and my mom came in second. You came in third.”

He pauses in thought and shakes his head. “No, you’re wrong. That was Pictionary.”

My head twists in his direction. “Oh, my God! You couldn’t trace a stick figure. You never won Pictionary. The only thing I remember you winning was how many marshmallows you could stuff in your mouth. Your big mouth was good for something,” I point out and a smile pulls at my lips.

“Then I demand a rematch this year. You. Me. Phase 10.”

My smile falters and dissolves. For a moment, I was caught up in the past. “No.”

There will be no replays of years gone by. Too many dark things happened after those carefree times.

The car slows and I sit up to see him pull off at the roadside apple stand. The same one our families always stopped at. Nash doesn't listen any better now than he ever did.

"How many apples should we get? One bushel or two? Will your mom want some? I love her apple crisp. Don't tell my mom that, though."

Mom hasn't done much Christmas baking since Dad passed, and I wonder if she misses it. Am I the reason she stopped? Probably. For the first time, I feel regret taking the joy of Christmas away from her.

"Two," I mumble, unsure why that popped out. "Let's get two."

If Mom has no interest in them, I have no idea what I'll do with that many apples. Maybe throw them at Nash's head.

He grabs a ball cap out of the glove box and pulls it low, his brown hair spilling down his back. I try to ignore how he's grown into a very handsome man. His pictures on social media don't do him justice. My seats in the nose bleed section don't either. Maybe the fragrance commercials on television capture his allure, but the man oozes something that makes you lose your head. He always has. It's no wonder thirteen-year-old McKenna fell so hard for him. "You really think that cap disguises you?"

He leans over and looks in the rearview mirror. "It's the best I can do."

I take the cap off and gather his hair in my hand, twist it up, and stuff it under the cap before replacing it on his head. I tell myself sternly there are no sparks flying from the touch of those silky locks against my palms. I also ignore the need to run my fingers through the soft tresses. I certainly don't lean over for another breathless kiss no matter how badly I want to. "There. That should work."

He tugs the hat down more and adjusts the position. "Thanks. You're going to need to teach me that. I've never gotten used to long hair."

“Then why keep it long? You never had long hair.” I remember seeing pictures of him right after he won the competition and thinking he needed a haircut. After that, he grew it out.

He shrugs, but I can tell it does bother him. “It’s in my contract. Long hair goes with the rocker look better than the wholesome country boy that I really am.”

I’m just not sure why. Is it the long hair or the reason he can’t cut it that troubles him? From the many news clips I’ve seen over the years, wholesome does not describe Nash Hudson. The parties, the women, and the excess have shown a different side to the man from the boy I knew. “I often wondered why your music took the direction it did.”

“You mean bubblegum rock?”

I hear the distaste in his tone. “Well, I don’t know if I’d call it that. It’s just different from what you used to play. Your lyrics are different too.”

He turns to me with a wide, handsome, panty-melting grin. So full of himself. “So you listen to my music?”

He caught me. My only recourse is to backpedal and I pump my legs for all they are worth. “No, I don’t. But sometimes Robert has it playing at the store. So, you know, I’ve heard bits and pieces here and there.”

“Yeah, right. So if I looked through your phone right now, I wouldn’t find a playlist?”

I dig my phone out of my bag, unlock it, and hand it to him. “Go crazy,” I say, confident there’s no way in hell he’ll find my guilty pleasure and mislabeled folder. Not even my best friend Casey knows about that folder.

What I wouldn’t give for a girl chat about now. I’d have already burned Casey’s phone up if she wasn’t on vacation with her new husband of only two months. They hadn’t been able to go on a honeymoon right after the wedding, and there’s no way I’m interrupting her marital bliss with my crazy-ass turn of events. One thing I wouldn’t share is that kiss.

“You’re a Swiftie?” he asks with a chuckle.

“I am. There’s nothing wrong with Tay-Tay. Her music has deep meaning.”

He continues scrolling through the phone. “She’s a sweetie too. We presented together at several awards shows in the past. We haven’t had a chance to work on a project together, but we’re both interested.”

I blink. How can he say that so casually? “Oh, my God! You know her?”

He looks up from my phone with a puzzled expression. “I don’t impress you, but Taylor does?” he asks before grabbing his heart dramatically. “That hurts, Mac. That really, really hurts.” He hands me my phone back.

I shrug and drop it back in my bag. “I guess once you’ve shared dirt pies with someone, it changes the dynamics. Come on. Let’s go get those apples so we can get to the tree farm before all the good ones are gone.”

We end up getting a bushel of red delicious and a bushel of Granny Smith. Then we get caramel apples and a huge bag of kettle corn that I know will take us a week to eat.

The tree lot is one of those where you ride on a hay wagon to the tree field. They hand you a saw and a tag, and leave you to find the tree of your dreams. I always used to love doing this. But now it has lost its golden glow of the season. The magic is gone. And it’s bitter cold. I never remember it being this cold. I pull my coat closer, glad I have my gloves and scarf with me. Back in the day, Nash and I would run from tree to tree, keeping us warm.

He stops by a tree and asks, “What about this one?”

I peruse the tree, considering his find. My brow rises. “Really, Nash? It’s lopsided.”

He tips his head to examine the tree. “Maybe we could cut it at an angle.”

“No. All the ornaments will hang wonky. Let’s look over here.” I head toward a section that doesn’t appear to be picked over, but I was right. All the good trees are already gone. One is too short. Another isn’t full enough. Several have bare spots.

“How is your mom?”

His question, out of the blue, startles me for a second. “She’s fine.”

“I haven’t seen her around the house.”

He wouldn’t know about her new living arrangement because he’s been gone. “She moved out about five years ago. She wanted to live at the retirement community in Saluda. She stays busy and involved with her friends there.”

“I’m really sorry about your dad.”

My chin tips and I refuse to look his way. “I’m going to try over there.” I veer to the left, but he follows close behind.

“My mom said he had a heart attack.”

“Are you going to help find a tree or yap all day long?” I snap.

His brows draw together and that devastating half-grin that always did me in surfaces. “Yap? I don’t think I’ve ever heard that expression. Okay, I get it. You don’t want to talk about your dad. I just don’t understand why.”

I drop the limb I was testing and turn on him. “You’re right. You don’t get it because you weren’t here. You weren’t here when he got his diagnosis. You weren’t here to help him through horrendous treatments that didn’t help, and you weren’t here when he lost the battle and left me and Mom to pick up the pieces of our lives without him.”

Instead of backing off like any sane person under attack would, he asks, “Is that why you didn’t go on to school?”

His calm and sympathetic manner dissipates my steam. My dad dying isn’t Nash’s fault. “I only got one semester in before we found out he had terminal cancer. What did you expect me to do? Let mom handle everything? She was only going through the motions of living while trying to deal and process what was happening to the man she loves and not let him know how she was dying inside right along with him.”

He takes a step closer and lays a hand on my arm. “I’m sorry, Mac. I didn’t know.”

His touch, even through layers of clothes and jackets, still makes me flutter inside. Sadly, I shake my head. “If you had, it wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

“Why didn’t you go back to school? That was your dream.”

Children’s laughter rings out a few rows over, reminding me this isn’t the place for a deep conversation. Nash’s hand grasps mine as we move on to the next tree up for inspection. The feeling is familiar, yet not.

“Mom wasn’t dealing with his death very well. I couldn’t leave her. And there was the store. I stepped in and tried to make it profitable, but Dad had let a lot of things go and had borrowed against the store just to keep afloat. After two years of scraping by on fumes, we had to sell the store.”

“That’s when your mom moved?”

“There was just enough left over from the sale to set her up at the retirement village. She insisted I keep the house, which I’m grateful for, but that left the problem of how to support us both.”

“And that’s when you started making handbags?”

I pause in my examination of tree #351 and look up at him. “I see Robert has been opening his big mouth.”

“Yeah. I stopped by to see you and we chatted. Your bags are incredible. How did it happen?”

This tree is too dry. We move to the next. “From a serious lack of cash flow and a need to create. I was able to get a job at a store downtown. Nick’s Knacks. Stupid name, I know. She had this denim handbag come in that had a steep price tag on it and I said I could make it. So I went around to all the second-hand stores and bought a lot of old jeans. They were cheap. Took them home and started cutting and sewing them into a tote bag. Nicky loved it and bought it that day for a hundred bucks.”

“Wow. That’s really amazing.”

“No, what’s amazing was setting up my phone and recording myself making them and posting the videos on Tickety Tocker. Robert, whom I met at college, saw me online and contacted me. He insisted I needed him as an assistant. At the time, I was struggling to keep up with orders so I hired him.”

“You’ve done an incredible job creating your niche. I saw several things I want to get my mom. Do you still make them yourself?”

His validation of my work means more to me than it should. “No. I design everything and I source the fabric. I have four seamstresses that work for me. They do the cutting and sewing.”

“I’m so proud of you, Mac.” He stops and since our hands are still clasped, I stop too. He looks down at me and his intense gaze is doing strange and sparkly things to my insides. He leans in and my heart stops. Is he going to kiss me again? Yes! No, he reaches and pulls a pine needle from my hair. Confused and disappointed, I look away and up at the tree in front of me. I touch the branch and gently pull. Nothing comes off. “I am proud of me too... because I just found the perfect tree.”

He takes a moment to consider the tree before us. “Um, isn’t this the first tree we looked at?”

I glance around at our location and realize we’re right back where we started from. That’s ironic. “It is, and at the time I thought it was the one, but I had to be sure and check out all the options.”

He chuckles, but gets down on his knee and begins to cut the base of the tree trunk. We both drag it back to the base camp where they will wrap it up while we go inside to warm up with hot, spiced cider and gingerbread by a roaring fire.

We stop to eat dinner on the way home, even though I’m not a bit hungry. It’s another blast from the past. The diner is one we oftentimes stopped at with our families after a day spent selecting our trees. We were tired, but happy and my heart was always filled with so much love and hope.

Nash is chipping away at my defenses, and I can't allow that to happen. I still haven't figured out why he's really here. I do believe his parents want to spend the holiday in their former home, but I'm not sure of his motive for showing up himself.

Then there's the kiss and the hand holding and how it felt right. I'm wading into dangerous territory.

The safest thing for my heart is to get his decorating done and let that be the end. Anything else is too risky. I trusted him once, and I learned my lesson. That's what I need to remember. Not the softness of his lips or the way I wanted more.

CHAPTER SEVEN



NASH

“This is the last one,” I announce as I gently stack the last box of Christmas decorations with the dozens of other boxes cluttering the den. I don’t remember there being this many. Can they multiply on their own? Maybe I was just younger and so gaga over Mac I didn’t care how many we had to store above the garage.

Damn, she looked incredible earlier, but then when we got home from getting the tree, she went home to change into what she calls working clothes. I almost swallowed my tongue when she came back, took her coat off, and damn... she looked insanely hot in emerald green spandex pants. My eyes keep going to her ass every time she turns around. I’ve spent way too much time checking her out. Thankfully, she’s not picked up on it or I’d have a black eye.

When I don’t get a response, I step closer to see what’s caught her attention inside the plastic crate she’s leaning over. I don’t like the expression on her face. Moving closer, I try to peer around her and ask, “What you got there?”

She drops what she’s holding and tries to put the lid back on. “Nothing. This must have gotten mixed up with the Christmas stuff.”

Flipping the top, I pull out the paper she was holding and chuckle at the massive amounts of clippings and magazines left inside. “I didn’t know Mom was saving this stuff.”

She'd cut out a picture from a magazine of me and a fan after a concert. The scantily-dressed girl was handing me a red lace bra when the picture was taken. The smirk on my face says it all. Back then, the girl probably did end up on my bus.

Just as I glance over at Mac, she gives me her back and busies herself with opening another box. But not before I see tears in her eyes. A punch to the gut couldn't have hurt any more.

Softly I call her name, but she doesn't turn around. "I was young. Too young and stupid while trying to deal with success and the demands that came along with it. I made some very wrong decisions and lived my life in a way that I'm not very proud of. But I did the best I could, given the circumstances."

She refuses to meet my gaze. "I know. I'm not judging you. Listen, it's late. I'm going home. We'll decorate tomorrow."

It feels exactly like she's judging me and found me guilty. "Mac, please don't go like this. There was a time when we told each other everything. Talk to me. Tell me what you're thinking."

She shakes her head and tries to move around me, but I stand my ground.

"You don't really want to know, Nash."

I touch her cheek with the pad of my thumb and still she doesn't look up. I want her to see the truth. "There's where you're wrong. Talk to me. I saw the tears. Do you want me to apologize? Because I'm sorry. I'm so sorry if I hurt you."

Her head comes up with fire in her eyes. "If you hurt me?" she snaps. "Fine. You want to know what I was thinking when I saw that picture of you and a half-naked woman? I was thinking that at the same time you were having fun with a groupie, I was dealing with my father dying. I was thinking that I wished I'd had my best friend to lean on, but then I remember that he let me down and made me promises he didn't keep."

She had me until the last sentence. “I let you down? That’s rich, coming from you, Mac.”

Her hands wave and land on her hips. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

I look her directly in the eyes. “I never let you down. You moved on and I just got out of your way.”

Her brow furrows. “What the hell are you talking about? I never moved on. I wish I could. But I do know that I will never trust you again. You were supposed to be there and you never showed.”

Before I can respond, she throws up her hands in disgust. “It doesn’t matter. I’m going home.”

She starts for the door and this time I let her go because she clearly has no idea what I’m talking about, which shakes the foundation of what I’ve believed for years.

I’ve kicked myself more than once for not demanding answers that night. I should have stayed and had her tell me to my face that she’d found someone else. Why didn’t I?

My mind travels back to that fateful night. For one, my uncle was pushing me to not miss the plane. I wasn’t supposed to leave until the next day, but he’d said the label I’d just signed with called and needed me there early. I pushed back, needing to see Mac. That was the night. I was going to tell her I loved her and change the status of our platonic relationship.

That’s not what happened. Not after I saw her in the arms of another guy. After that, I was so hurt and confused I couldn’t get out of town fast enough.

What I can’t get out of my head is her reaction when I accused her of letting me down. She couldn’t fake a reaction like that—she’s not that good of an actress. She never could lie to her parents either, not that she ever tried, but there were some little white lies over the years that she never got away with. Mostly having to do with being with me or something I’d talked her into doing. Like jumping from the tree in the back yard and landing on the trampoline. Or going skinny-

dipping in the lake. Or spending an afternoon in a deer stand listening to me play and sing.

It's nearing midnight as I flip the lights off and head to bed, but I know it's going to be a long time until sleep comes.

The next morning, the phone wakes me. Half asleep, I fumble for it on the nightstand. It takes two tries before I swipe to answer. "Hello?"

"Honey, are you still asleep?"

I blink to clear the sleep from my eyes and the time comes into focus. "Mom? It's seven in the morning. Of course I was asleep."

"I was sure you and McKenna were up early to get all the decorating done. Don't leave it until the last minute. I really want to win Best of Yard this year. You know we always did place in the top three outdoor Merry-scapes."

I remember the endless trips to the hardware store and to the craft store for needed supplies or decorations. The best one was when mom insisted she needed a seven-foot-tall Christmas chicken from the Tractor Supply store. Mac and I had gone to six stores in three counties until I found one. "Wait a minute. You entered the house in the Merry-scapes contest?"

She giggles. "Yes, I did. So you have to do a bang-up job. Your dad and I can add the final touches when we get there."

She used to start decorating right after Thanksgiving and barely finished in time for the contest, and she expects me to do it in a week? "Isn't it a little late to be telling me this? I thought I was just supposed to put the tree up and set a few things around the house."

Mom laughs like that's the craziest thing she's ever heard. "And this is why I said to get McKenna to help. The two of you can knock it out in no time."

"Well, about that..."

The joy of only a moment earlier turns somber and I feel guilty for taking her happiness away. "Oh no, Nashton, please

tell me you asked her to help?”

“Yes, I did. And we went to Wagoner’s and got a tree. A really good tree. And I got all the boxes down from the garage attic, but I’m not sure she’s going to help. I, um, might have made her mad.”

“Nashton, what did you do?”

I don’t want to get into all the details with my mother. “Mom, did McKenna and Danny Harvey ever get together after I left?”

“Do you mean Henry and Joanie’s boy? Wasn’t he a class ahead of you?”

“Yes, that’s him. Did he and Mac ever date?”

She pauses in thought. “No, honey. Not that I remember. After you left, she was so sad she rarely left the house. Mostly with her friend. What was her name? Casey. That’s right, Casey. Then she went off to school. Well, at least until Christmas when her father was diagnosed with cancer. She never went back, you know.”

Now I do. Why was I so stubborn and wouldn’t listen to news from home? I shut that whole chapter of my life down because it hurt too much and I didn’t want to hear how Mac was having a wonderful life, married to someone else, and having his babies. “I know that now.”

“I tried to tell you, sweetie.”

“I know you did and it’s all on me for not letting you. I should have known and I should have helped.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. You had a lot going on at that time too.”

Working my ass off doing shows, writing, partying, and finally wising up to the deviousness of my uncle. He almost cost me my career. “I should have done better.”

“Well, I’m sure if you explain about the contest to McKenna, she’ll understand.”

I'm afraid it's not going to be as simple as she thinks. "I'm not so sure about that."

"I'll leave you to handle it however you think best and I know you won't let your father and me down with decorating the house. We are so excited to be home this Christmas."

We chat a little more and when I end the call, I feel the weight of their expectations on my very incapable shoulders. If I were in California, or any major city really, I could pick up the phone and hire someone to create a winter wonderland on the front lawn.

Unable to go back to sleep, I get up and shower. I'll start breakfast and if Mac hasn't shown by then, I'm not sure what I'm going to do.

I dunk my head under the water and rest it against the tile. Mac... so many regrets. So many memories. For years, her bright green eyes have been etched in my mind. They've even inspired several songs. The color so vivid green with speckles of gold and brown. They've haunted me, wondering what happened. Why she chose him over me.

I'm pulling on jeans when I hear a knock at the back door. Before I can get there to let her in, the door is already opening. My bare feet slide to a stop just inside the kitchen. I must have startled her because she gasps. "Jesus, Nash. Do you have to..."

Her gaze moves to my chest and her words screech to a stop. She blinks and takes a step closer.

I may have flexed a bit under her heated gaze. This is what we never had a chance to experience. Lust. Raw, appreciative desire for each other.

Even as I step closer, her gaze remains locked on my bare chest. I take her hand in mine, lift it slowly, and place it over the area of my heart. She owns it. She always has. "It's okay. You can touch."

The warmth of her skin against mine almost sings.

She licks her lips and I will myself, unsuccessfully, not to react. "Your tattoos. I've never seen them up close. Well, I

suppose I saw them the night I hit you, but I was traumatized and didn't pay attention. They aren't in your fragrance commercials."

"I make them use cover-up or put a different temporary tattoo on top. My tattoos are personal and private. Even when I'm on stage, I cover the most important ones."

Her fingers trace the intricate lettering. You can't tell it's any more than a design unless you look close. I can tell the moment she realizes what she spelled. She looks up at me from beneath her lashes, her bright green eyes questioning. "It's my name?"

I nod, seeing even more questions in her gaze. "It is."

Her head tilts to one side, her eyes still fixed on the design. "But why?"

"Because even when I was hurt and angry thinking you'd chosen someone else, you still held my heart in your hands."

She shakes her head and looks up into my eyes. "Someone else? I've never wanted anyone else, Nash. What are you talking about?"

I close my eyes for a moment and let her admission sink in. I didn't know I needed to hear that so badly. It's what I've always felt about her, but didn't think the feelings were returned. "That night. When we were supposed to meet at the Christmas dance. I saw you with Danny Harvey. He was kissing you and you were letting him."

She shakes her head again, confusion pulling at her eyes and then she remembers. "You saw that?"

My jaw clenches. "So you admit you kissed him. The night we were supposed to finally be together, you were kissing someone else."

"No," she says firmly and looks directly in my eyes. "He kissed me. If you'd have stuck around, you would have seen me knee him in the balls and push him down on the ground. He was moaning like a baby when I ran past him to get inside to you."

“What?” She didn’t choose him?

“Danny joined the Marines right after that. He was gone for three years. He’s settled now, married with kids and runs a local garage. You know, I happened to run into him once about two years ago and I asked him why he kissed me that night. He apologized and said some guy paid him fifty bucks to do it.”

“Somebody paid him to kiss you?” The hairs on the back of my neck bristle. I hope I’m wrong, but it sounds like my uncle had a hand in this mess. He wanted me to focus on my career. My stomach is turning and my blood is boiling. I’m responsible for being without Mac. It’s my fault. She suffered and doubted what we had because of me. I’m not sure how to process this.

“That’s what he said and I don’t have any reason to doubt him. He’s turned out to be a really great guy.”

My hand drops from her warm cheek and her face softens. “Nash, what is it?”

Her innocent question has me taking a step back. “I did this to us.”

She reaches for me and I’m too weak to stop her from touching my arm. “I don’t understand. You did what?”

“I can’t prove it, but I bet my uncle paid Danny to kiss you, knowing I’d see and would jump to conclusions.”

“Why would he do that?”

Money, greed, and jealousy. That’s why he’d do it in a heartbeat. “He wanted me to focus on my career. Earlier that day, we’d had a blowup. He was pushing me to take an earlier flight and I wouldn’t hear of it. You and I had plans and nothing was going to get in the way.” Thinking back, Frank wasn’t that surprised to see me back home so soon.

“That’s the exact way I felt too. I couldn’t wait. Then you didn’t show and I didn’t know what to think. I tried calling, but you didn’t answer. It was like you simply disappeared and we meant nothing to each other. All my hopes and dreams were gone in one night.”

I caress her face. “I’m so sorry, Mac. I’m sorry I ever doubted you and what we had.”

“Why did you, Nash? Why was it so easy to believe I’d so easily turn to someone else?”

Searching my very soul for an answer, I come up empty. “I don’t know. Stupid youth maybe?”

She bites her lips and nods. “It sounds like if we were so easily swayed, we never would have made it back then. Especially with the way your life changed. Maybe I was too young and immature to be able to handle the lifestyle your career demanded.”

She may be correct and that’s an admission I don’t want to make. I guess we will never know how our lives would have played out if given a chance. “I’d like to think we would have made it. Together. We would have had each other and we could have gotten through anything because we would have been in it together. That’s the way we’d always planned.”

I see the doubt on her face. “I’d like to believe that too. I’m just not sure in the real world it would have worked out that way.”

I take her hands in mine and kiss her knuckles. “I love you, Mac. I have never stopped loving you. That night, I was going to say those words to you and I was going to tell you I wanted a life with you.”

Tears shimmer in her eyes as she smiles up at me. “That’s what I was hoping you were going to tell me because I’ve always loved you, Nash. I’m not sure what that means now. We’re different people from the kids we were back then.”

“We are. We’re older and wiser, and we’re established in who we are. We know what we want in life and, Mac, I want you. No games. No doubts. This is me, saying I want you. As a friend, but also as more.”

The look on her face tells me I’m not going to get the answer I was hoping for. “I’m not sure it’s that simple, Nash. I want you too, but we don’t really know each other anymore. Do we fit now?”

My heart sinks. “Are you saying you don’t want to at least try?”

Her chuckle releases some of the tension I was holding on to. “No. I don’t know what I’m saying. This whole conversation isn’t something I ever imagined happening when I came over this morning.”

The air around us fills with possibilities. “There’s no rush or time limit. We call the shots. So what do you say? Can we...”

“What? Date? Be boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Well, yes to all of those, but for now I’ll settle for friends. That’s what we always were, up to that Christmas. Can we at least start there?”

“Something I’ve always wondered is why we were never more than friends. I know, in the early days, nothing else was an option, but later, why didn’t our friendship turn into more?”

“I don’t know your reasoning, but for me, I was scared to death to want more. I was too afraid to lose the closeness we had if we took things to the next level and failed. I couldn’t face ending what we had. I needed you in my life. I knew we could be friends.”

She nods, accepting my answer. “Same here. I was terrified I wouldn’t be enough for you. You had such big goals. I didn’t know if I could ever fit in them. There were times I thought we were going to take that step, but you’d pull back. I thought that maybe you didn’t find me... desirable.”

The last part of that I’m going to ignore for a moment. “You could have fit. You would have. Now we have a second chance. What do you say we get back to what we’re best at?”

“Being friends,” she replies with a smile that makes me want to write a song about it.

“Right. And then, who knows what we can become.” I know exactly what I want. Or rather who I want, but moving slowly is the right path to our forever.

She holds out her hand and I take it to shake. “Okay, friend. What do you say we get started turning your mom’s house into Christmas Central?”

The many boxes filling the room say it’s going to be a huge undertaking. “I’d say where do we start. Did I mention that Mom called this morning and told me she entered the house into the Merry-scapes contest?”

Shocked, her eyes widen. “No. You failed to mention that. We really do need to get started.”

She starts to turn, but I take her hand and pull her against my chest. “Oh, and Mac? Don’t for one minute think that I don’t desire you as a woman because you’d be wrong. After that kiss, how can you doubt?”

She swallows and nods. “So noted. And if you don’t put a shirt on, all bets are off.”

Her honest and lust-filled reply startles me for a moment before my head falls back and I laugh.

CHAPTER EIGHT



McKENNA

Casey: I'm never coming home.

McKenna: You have to come home. I miss my bestie and your va-jay-jay needs rest.

Casey: I miss you too and you don't need to worry about the condition of my va-jay-jay. David has been taking excellent care of it. Last night he rented a yacht for an evening cruise. We did it on the deck with moonlight shimmering on the water. It was so romantic and now I should be packing, but I don't want to leave.

McKenna: It sounds amazing, but I need you at home.

Casey: (ears twitching) Why? What's going on?

McKenna: Nash is home.

Casey: WHAT? WHY? WHEN?

McKenna: He's been here a few days.

Casey: And he's still breathing?

McKenna: Yes. We're amicable. Like I said, I have a lot to tell you.

Casey: You better start talking.

McKenna: We can talk when you get home. The important part is that we've made peace with our past and are seeing where things go.

Casey: Did he explain why he ghosted you?

McKenna: Do you remember me telling you about Danny Harvey kissing me in the parking lot that night?

Casey: Yes, and then Danny said some guy paid him to kiss you.

McKenna: Right. Nash saw it. He was there that night and thought I'd chosen Danny over him.

Casey: Why the hell would he think that?

McKenna: Nash thinks his uncle was behind it, trying to move his focus from me and onto his budding career.

Casey: I never liked his uncle. So have you slept with him yet?

McKenna: No. We aren't there yet.

Casey: You haven't slept with the rock star! Mac! I am so disappointed in you!

McKenna: I said we were taking things slow.

Casey: No kisses? Secret touches? A lusty eye-fucking?

McKenna: Yes, to kissing. There have been some innocent touches. And a lot of lusty looks.

Casey: Just a kiss! Honestly, I'm disappointed. Listen, I've got to go. Things are developing here, if you know what I mean 😊

McKenna: We'll get together when you get home.

There's no reply and I'm not surprised. If I were on my honeymoon with a hunk like David, I'd take advantage of sexy

time too.

A night with Casey, wine, and a pizza sounds fantastic and exactly what I need. Being able to talk it out and have her insight into what's going on in my life right now would be incredible.

For the past four days, Nash and I have been working on his house, and it's finally finished. Chuckling out loud, I remember the look on Robert's face when we stopped by the shop to tell him I was taking the week off. He'd been so fan boy over Nash to begin with and then taking the week off, especially this close to Christmas, knocked him for a loop. Since I started the business, I've never taken even a day off. It's no wonder he was rendered speechless.

I glance around my own den and shake my head in wonder. How did I let Nash talk me into putting up a tree? My mom will be beside herself with excitement when she sees I've voluntarily decorated. Not to the extent she would have, but at least a little here and there.

I'm amazed that feeling of sadness isn't breaking my heart when I look at the tree all shiny and bright. In fact, it felt good to pull the few decorations out that Mom left. I didn't have the same innocent holiday spirit, but I didn't cry this time. That's progress.

Nash is the biggest part of my turnaround. We've gotten right back into the best friends area with ease. The problem with that is that I want more than his friendship. I've seen the heated looks he gives me, but he doesn't act on those feelings and it's frustrating not knowing if I'm seeing things or if he really does want me. Past insecurities make it hard to tell.

Tonight when he walked me home, I thought he was going to kiss me again. There was a lean from both of us, but then he unlocked the door open, said goodnight, and that he'd see me in the morning.

I'd just locked the door behind me when Casey texted. Pushing up from the couch, I make my way to the bedroom, needing a long, hot shower. I don't remember being sore and exhausted from decorating when we were younger. Back then,

we worked for weeks to get where we are now. We've done weeks' worth of work in only four days. Is it any wonder my muscles are rebelling from overuse?

Yawning, I walk into the bedroom and my gaze goes directly to the bed. I'm so tired. I glance toward the bathroom and back to the bed. There's no decision to make. I fall face first onto the bed, promising myself I'll rest for just a minute and then I'll shower and get ready for bed. Just a minute. I should probably set my alarm too since Nash is picking me up at eight.

Even with my eyes closed, I smile thinking of the fun day we have planned. Shower and set alarm. Got it. Just a few more minutes.



A binding pain has me turning over to get comfortable. The pinching continues and I shift again to no avail. Reaching up I pull at my pajamas and encounter...my bra? What?

I drag my eyes open and at first I can't make sense of why I'm sleeping on top of the duvet and why I'm already dressed. A few confused moments later I remember the night before and my sad attempt at only closing my eyes for a few minutes. Why did I fall for that? I was bone tired, that's why.

Yawning hugely, I sit up and throw my legs over the side of the bed. Thankfully I'd taken my boots off at the front door last night or I'd probably still be wearing them too. That's when I catch a glimpse of the clock on the bedside table.

I gasp. "Crap!"

It's 7:45!

I jump out of bed, pulling my shirt off on the way to the bathroom for the world's quickest shower. My bra comes next and then I stumble on one foot to take my jeans and panties off. Each discarded item is tossed in the wind behind me.

One look in the mirror and I have no option but to wash my hair. Even putting it up in a ponytail won't help the tangled mess on my head. Maybe I should text Nash and let him know I'm going to be late. Yes. That's what I should do.

I race naked back into the bedroom for my phone, and that's when I remember I left it in the den after texting Casey. It's now 7:54. Fine. I don't even stop to grab a robe. Dashing down the stairs, I come to a screeching halt when I find Nash at the bottom of the stairs gawking up at me with that deer-in-the-headlights look.

I scream and he jumps, but his eyes don't stop their thorough perusal of my body. Frozen in place by his heated stare, I can feel my heart beating faster as a flush spreads throughout my body. My nipples turn to hardened points and my core clenches. Breathlessly I mumble, "Nash, what are you doing here?"

His mouth opens, but all he does is look. At me. All of me. He shakes his head like he's trying to form words, but can't. "I knocked. You didn't answer. I was worried."

"Oh, yeah, I overslept. I was just coming to text you. I left my phone in the den last night." The ridiculousness of the situation has me biting my lip. We're here, carrying on a normal conversation, but I'm in my birthday suit and he's incapable of speech.

"Oh," he says and takes the first step, then the second, and finally he's one step below me which puts us at about eye-to-eye level. His thumb caresses my cheek and down to the corner of my mouth. I want to suck on it. My breasts are begging for his touch. If I look, I know I'll find my nipples pointing right at him.

"I want to kiss you, Mac, but I won't."

"Why not?" My voice comes out coarse with emotion.

"I've wanted you most of my life and seeing you here, like this, so soft and flushed, I won't be able to stop myself from just kissing."

With bravery I didn't know I possessed, I run my hands up his chest and behind his neck. Looking deep into his eyes, I reply, "I see nothing wrong with that. Not the kissing... or the not stopping."

My tongue peeks out to wet my lips and his eyes track the whole task.

His breath stills.

The muscles in his jaw tic.

A flood of wetness seeps from between my legs. I want him with every fiber of my being. I always have. This is what should have happened that night so long ago.

He leans in until we are no more than a breath apart. "There will be no going back from this, Mac. You will be mine. Forever."

He thinks that scares me? My fingers inch down and I start unbuttoning his shirt. "See? I knew we were on the same page because I want you forever too."

"Good," he says, and leans in to nuzzle my hair and then sighs.

"Did you just smell my hair?"

He does it again and I grin. "I did, and it smells fuckin' awesome."

I chuckle. "I doubt that. I overslept and it's dirty."

This time when he runs his nose down my neck, I'm the one that sighs.

"Don't care," he murmurs. "It smells like you."

"And I smell dirty?" I tease, while elongating my neck for more access.

"No, you smell like," he pauses and draws back just enough to look into my eyes. "You smell like home. Like hopes of our future, of all our dreams coming true, and of many nights spent in each other's arms as we grow old together."

Our mouths crash together, and I swear I feel sparks at the touch of his lips on mine. He wraps his warmth around my chilled softness heating me instantly and making me feel cherished and small. The kiss grows deeper and rougher, and my breath catches in my throat as a tremor of tingles travels through my body. This kiss is like no other. This is a kiss that's taken ten years of frustration, lost dreams, and angst to finally come to fruition.

He's a master at this kissing business and my obvious lack of experience starts a spreading spiral of doubt. He's been with countless women doing things I've only read about in books. How will I ever please him? He must sense my insecurity because he pulls back and stares down into my eyes. Breathing heavily, he asks, "You okay, Mac?"

His rock-hard cock presses against me. The look of loving concern in his eyes is all I need to kick every single reservation I have to the curb. This is Nash, the man I've loved most of my life. *This is it.*

With a thumb, I point over my shoulder. "You know the way to my bedroom."

CHAPTER NINE



NASH

That's all the encouragement I need before tossing her over my shoulder. She yelps and I take the same route to her bedroom that I swear I could make in the dark. Never have I been hard as stone, though, when entering this particular bedroom door.

My hand on her ass grips tighter as I let her slide down my front. Her eyes look up into mine when she feels how badly I want her. Her throat contracts visibly when she swallows as her spiky nipples drag across my chest. She moans and I'm done.

Fuck, I'm not going to last.

She pushes my shirt and coat to the floor as one. I toe my boots off and together we unbutton and unzip my pants.

A wicked smile plays at her lips. "Ahh, commando. Just the way I always imagined a rock star would be."

"No, baby, I'm no rock star today. I'm just the man who's going to rock your world and ruin you for anyone else." Also, I'm keeping it to myself that I forgot to pack briefs.

Her gaze sneaks down to my cock straining hard and proud, and weeping from the tip. "You already have," she whispers.

My chest puffs and I want to toss her on the bed and fuck her until she can't remember her own name. But this is our

first time together. I've dreamed of being with her, and I'm not going all caveman. This seduction requires finesse.

With a hand to the back of her knees, I lift her and place her gently on the bed. I follow her down, putting her breasts at exactly the right angle. My mouth waters, wanting a taste. "Perfection," I mumble just before my tongue licks one nub and I draw it into my mouth and suck.

She whimpers and asks lightly, "You don't think they're too small?"

Though she tries to mask it with humor, I hear the insecurity in her voice. As much as it pains me, I release her nipple and rise up on an elbow so I can look her in the eyes. "These breasts are *perfect*."

I accentuate the statement by planting a kiss on the underside of each one. "There's not a single thing I would ever change about them. From the swell of the globes, to the round pink areole, to the dark nipples that beg for my mouth."

She moans, tossing that stunning hair back. "It's just... I imagine you're used to bigger ones. Like in that picture."

My expression hardens at hearing her compare herself to anyone else. Especially girls who only wanted their fifteen minutes of fame because they slept with me. "I'm not going to sully our first time together by bringing even a single thought of anyone else between us. You aren't my first, just like I know I'm not your first, but I promise you that you will be my last."

Her gaze clears and she gives me a sweet, adorable smile as she nods. "We saved the best for last."

"You got that fuckin' right." I suck a nipple into my mouth with just enough force to hopefully curl her toes and cause a fire to burn in her core. Her head falls back and she moans as her fingers dive through my hair, pulling me closer.

Switching it up, I move to the second perfect breast and make sure to give it the same loving attention. I have her desperate for more before I crawl up her body, lining my cock up to rest against the space between her legs.

“Do you feel what you do to me, baby?” I ask and press my hardness even closer.

“Mmm-hmm,” she says, her voice raspy and hoarse.

I skim my hands over her stomach and up to cup her breasts, which elicits another agreeable sound from deep in her throat. She tilts her hips, pressing closer against my cock. I move my hips, giving her the friction she’s seeking, but not enough to get off.

With my thumb and forefinger, I pinch her nipples, and her back arches.

“More, Nash. I want more,” she begs, the throaty sound threatening to end our fun time. She has me that turned on and I’m not even inside her. Yet. My control is slipping and I have to wonder why I’m holding off.

Oh, yeah. Reason filters through. I want to take my time and show her how much I love her by doing this right. There’s too much on the line. I need to man up and hold back. I start to do just that, but her hands in my hair stop me.

“Where are you going?” she demands bluntly.

I grin, clearly understanding her frustration. “We need to slow things down.”

She shakes her head firmly. “No, we don’t. Things are at just the right speed.”

Her frantic need pulls me even closer to losing control. “Baby, I want to love you. I want to love every part of you. Over and over again before we come together.”

“Can’t you multi-task?” she whines.

I chuckle at the same moment I hear, “Yoo-hoo! McKenna, are you upstairs?”

We both freeze, our eyes wide with fright, and she whispers, “It’s my mom.” She points out something we both know.

Getting caught in McKenna’s bed is just as bad as I always thought it would be if we’d had that type of relationship back

then. The worst her parents would have found when we were young was me in her room playing games or falling asleep on the floor during an all-night movie marathon. In our current state of undress, I doubt her mom would believe we're playing naked Twister. "I know it's your mom. What I don't know is what I should do."

With a heavy, frustrated sigh, she says what we both know. "Well, the big O is out. For now. Rain check."

I glance toward the window with distaste. "Right. Should I go down the gutter like I used to?"

Her forehead furrows. "Do you really think you can still do that? I mean, you are a lot more muscle-y now."

The stairs creak and we recognize our time is limited to make decisions. About two minutes precisely. I jump up and kick my clothes under the bed before sprinting to the bathroom. I'm just closing the door when I hear the bedroom door open. I press my ear to the wood and listen in to see if Violet is on to us.

Why it matters, I'm not sure. Would she even care about finding a man in her adult daughter's bed? My blood boils thinking of any other man besides me being there.

"Honey, why in the world aren't you up? Are you not feeling well?"

"No, Mom. I'm feeling fine. I just overslept. You know, helping Nash decorate has been exhausting."

Her bed rustles. Her mom must have taken a seat on the mattress.

"I see."

I hear suspicion in her tone. Then there's a pause. I wish I could see what's going on.

"Did you come over for a reason, Mom?"

"Hmmm, well, I spoke with Trish and she told me about you and Nash decorating for Christmas. Frankly, I didn't believe her so I had to come see for myself. To say I'm shocked there's a tree in your den is an understatement. What's

going on? I thought you were anti-Nash and all things Christmas.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I should have called, but everything has moved pretty fast. You’re right. I wasn’t happy to see him. In fact, I hit him with a baseball bat and knocked him out.”

“McKenna! Couldn’t you at least hear him out before you did something so drastic? I thought your father and I taught you violence is never the answer.”

I grin when Mac giggles. “I didn’t hit him because I was mad at him, Mom. The lights were on in the Hudson’s house and I thought the cleaning crew that was there earlier in the day left them on, so I went over to check. I took the bat in case it was more than that. I wasn’t expecting to find anyone in the house and never Nash. He surprised me and I swung.”

“Oh, dear. Is he okay?”

“Yes, he’s fine and the unicorn horn on his head is almost gone. He talked me into helping him decorate for his parents.”

“So you two made up? You’re back to being friends now?”

“Something like that.”

I chuckle silently.

“Be careful, McKenna. He hurt you so badly I don’t want you to ever go through that pain again.”

“I know, Mom.” The sorrow in Mac’s voice hits me right in the gut. Never again. I make a vow right this moment to never cause that incredible woman another nanosecond of hurt or doubt in what I feel for her. We’ve lost enough time because of misunderstandings.

“You always did love that boy. I thought him disappearing on you might have been the right thing to do back then. You two were so young and going in different directions. I didn’t see how things could work out between you.”

“I know, Mom. I’m beginning to believe that wasn’t our time. I guess we’ll never know if we would have made it.”

“You still love him?”

I almost fall into the door to hear her softly murmured reply. “I do. I never stopped.”

A spark of hope takes up residence in my heart.

“I know, you always thought you were so sneaky going to his concerts, but I knew.”

What?

My ears perk up. She came to my shows? The little fake. She said she never listened to my music.

“Mom! How did you know? I didn’t tell anyone, not even Casey.”

“Oh, please. She knows too. We let you believe you got away with going to see him play his music. Even if we didn’t know beforehand, you always seemed depressed for a week after he played anywhere nearby. It was like you were living life through a fog of memories.”

“You’re kidding me. Is there anything else you’d like to come clean about?”

Violet lets out one of those you-can’t-fool-mom laughs. “Well, I have a feeling that the man who owns the pants that are sticking out from under your bed is probably in the bathroom and if I had to guess, I’d say it’s Nash.”

I cringe and can only call through the door, “Hello, Mrs. Taylor.”

“Hi, Nash. Your parents are very happy you’re home for Christmas. You shouldn’t have waited so long.”

My forehead rests on the wooden door. This is the weirdest situation I’ve ever been in. “Yes, ma’am, you’re right. I shouldn’t have waited.”

“What are your intentions toward my daughter?”

“Mom! Please, can we do this another time?”

I have no problem answering. “Honorable, ma’am. I love her with all my heart.”

There's a pause and again I wonder what's happening. "Good. That's all I need to know. I'll be going now, but I expect us to get together soon. When we all have our clothes on."

Mac and I reply in unison.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, Mom."

I wait until I hear the bedroom door close. And then I wait until I hear the front door close. And just for good measure, I grab a towel and wrap it around my hips before I slowly peek from behind the bathroom door.

The bedroom is empty except for Mac, who now has sweat pants and a t-shirt on, peering out the window. Cock-blocked by her mom. The moment is gone and while I would have no problem getting us going again, the look on Mac's face tells a different story. I toe my clothes from beneath the bed and pull them on. I don't miss the look of disappointment over our missed opportunity but there's something on her mind.

"She's gone. Talk about awkward."

I cross my arms and raise a brow. "I'd rather talk about concerts."

She winces and shakes her head. "You heard that, did you?"

I have to dig a little deeper. "I did. Would you like to explain why someone that doesn't listen to my music goes to my concerts?"

She shrugs indifferently. "No. Not particularly."

She huffs out a sigh and sits down on the bed. I take a seat beside her.

"Fine. I went to a concert or two of yours."

I feel like that's a lowballed number. "You went to two?"

She shrugs again and I'm not buying it. "Maybe a few more."

“How many more?” I push for a more accurate answer.

She blows out another breath and admits, “Nine. I went to nine concerts.”

Nine. I’ve only been on nine tours over the years. Some shorter, some longer than others. “But you never came backstage or let me know you were there.”

She bites her lip and shakes her head. “No. How would I have let you know? I’m sure you don’t have the same number.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Fluttercup.” I dig my phone from my pocket. Actually, my two phones, and hold them up for her to see.

She frowns as she stares closely at the phone in my left hand. “You have the same phone? How does it even work?”

I pull up the voice message I’ve listened to a million times. “Only you and my parents have this number. I could have gotten a new one, but they couldn’t assure me the message would transfer over. Something about operating systems that I didn’t understand. I refused to take a chance so that’s why I still have this phone.”

I tap a button and keep my eyes on her face as she remembers the call while it plays. It’s so ordinary. A day in the life of teenage McKenna. One that I’ve debated and wondered about for years.

“Hey, Nashy, Mom took me and Casey to the salon and we got our hair styled! Then we went to the nail place and had mani/pedi’s. I got a very sophisticated glittery green color. It goes perfectly with my dress. It’s fire! Casey is coming over to my house and we are going to dress together and probably touch up our makeup and hair. Oh, gosh! I didn’t tell you that mom took us to the mall and we had our makeup done at Sephora! The stylist gave me smoky eyes. Very dramatic.

“Anyway, Keith is going to pick Casey up. They asked me to ride with them to the dance, but they’re going to dinner first and I don’t want to be a third wheel. Plus, I want to get to the

dance early. I wish you were free so we could ride together, but that's the life of a budding rock star. I'm so proud of you!

"The reason I called is to let you know that I have something very important to tell you tonight. I'm a coward for not telling you before now and I've put it off too long. I think it may change our lives forever. See you soon, Nashy! Later!"

Her expression changes to reflect many emotions as the message plays out. There are tears in her eyes at the end. I touch her cheek and she nestles against my hand.

"After seeing you with Danny, I thought your message meant you were going to tell me you two were together."

Her sad, stunned eyes look up at me. "No. That's not what I meant. I was so excited to see you. You'd been so busy with the show and I missed you. That night I was going to tell you that I loved you and that I was ready for more."

I close my eyes and hurt for the two lost souls torn apart by an inopportune moment. Or a devious and greedy uncle. "And I didn't show. You must have hated me."

"At first, I was afraid something happened to you. I couldn't imagine any reason you'd just not come. It was going to be our last night together before you left to go back to California and start working on your first album. When you didn't answer your phone, I really started to worry. I went to your house and your parents said you'd already gone. I was confused and scared."

I pull her onto my lap and wrap my arms around her. Her head rests against my heart. "I'm sorry, Mac. I never meant to hurt you. When I saw you in his arms, I went crazy with jealousy. Getting away was the only thing on my mind. It made my uncle extremely happy to get me on the plane that night, and now I know why."

"I thought you chose your career over me."

"Never. You were the most important thing in my life. You still are." I tip her chin and press a soft, gentle kiss on her lips.

"There are so many things I wish we could go back and change. But honestly, as much as it hurt, it was probably the

best thing to happen at the time. We were so young and had the stars of innocence in our eyes. Going our separate ways gave us time to grow into the people we are today.”

I don't know if I agree with her or not. The early days of my career were chaotic and insanely busy. If she'd been with me during those early years, would she have felt lost and alone in a city she didn't know, surrounded by strangers. Would she have felt abandoned? Would she have been happy? So many unanswered questions. The only thing I know for sure is that this woman has always had my heart. She deserves the world and I plan to give it to her. Every single day for the rest of our lives.

CHAPTER TEN



NASH

“This isn’t fair,” Nash complains as he scoops more cookie dough onto the half-filled pans on the kitchen counter. “We did all the Christmas decorating. Why do we have to make the cookies too?”

“Stop whining. We decorated your house for your parents, we can make a few dozen cookies for my mom.” Carefully I measure two cups of flour and dump it into the mixing bowl. “If you weren’t eating so many, we would have already been finished.”

“That’s the cookie tax for making them. I can’t reduce the payment,” he deadpans, causing me to laugh.

When we came downstairs after my mom left, we found a note along with supplies asking us to make cookies for her to hand out to her friends at the retirement village. I never anticipated she had so many friends. Frankly, I think she’s going to go door to door and give them to everyone that lives there—friend, acquaintance, or stranger.

She also left an itemized list of what to make, amounts, and the recipes. My mom is thorough and leaves nothing to chance. I would even go so far as to say she knew all the time about me and Nash being together again, and it was just part of her plan to get us to make the cookies.

“What’s another dozen or two when you’ve already made 220 cookies? The ginger cookies are my favorite, followed closely by the snickerdoodles.”

“I bet you never thought this was how you’d spend your Christmas.”

“You mean doing something fun and fulfilling with the woman I love? I hoped, but I genuinely didn’t know how things would turn out. I mean you did hit me with a bat.”

I laugh and flutter my lashes. “Ahhh, you say the sweetest things. Now get busy. We still have to make the chocolate chip cookies.”

He drops the scoop into the metal bowl of dough. “No. Nope. I refuse to work until you pay the kiss tax.”

Wrapping his arms around my waist, he pulls me against his chest and I go willingly. This isn’t the first installment demanded and I gladly pay. When his mouth takes mine, I grip the front of his shirt to keep my knees from giving way because his kiss turns me into a wet noodle. He swipes my lips with his tongue and I open. He takes the kiss deeper until, much later, we break apart, our chests heaving to breathe in needed oxygen.

“I love that well-kissed look in your eyes. I plan on seeing it a lot.” He goes in for another.

Not sure I can handle more without climbing him like a monkey, so I take a step back. He follows until he nudges me against the counter. I bump into the mixer, activating the on switch and in the next moment, the room fills with a whirring sound and snow falls down around us. I squeal and then laugh out loud as we’re both covered in a cloud of flour.

The blue and green of our eyes are the only visible color about us. Our hair, our clothes, and even our skin are covered in flour. The kitchen didn’t fare any better.

“Oh, my God! I can’t believe this mess.”

Undeterred by being turned into a Yeti, Nash laughs and gets a devious gleam in his eyes. “There’s only one thing to do.”

I don't even get to ask what before I'm hefted up onto his shoulder. I yelp as he takes the stairs two at a time. This is becoming a habit. In the bathroom, he sets me down on my feet. I look up into his eyes and I see all the same flutters of anticipation I feel inside.

He growls under his breath. "Mac, I want to take things slow, but when you look at me like that, I'm not sure it's possible."

"You mean looking like a snowman?"

"A sexy snowwoman," he corrects, leans in, and presses a kiss on my lips.

I'm becoming addicted, but not to that taste. We both gum the unpleasant flour now coating our mouths.

"Shower with me?" he asks.

I know what he's asking and I know what I want. What I've wanted for a very long time. With my eyes sending all the right signals, I reply, "Yes."

"I'm clean, Mac. I'm tested, but I can run next door and grab a condom."

"I'm clean too and I'm on birth control for my periods. I've always insisted on condoms, but with you, I don't want anything between us."

"Accidents happen," he says, and doesn't seem a bit bothered by the chance.

Strangely enough, I'm not bothered by the thought either. "They do. And I'd welcome a child with you. Just to be clear, I hope it's not soon, but eventually I'd like a family with you."

He grins and pulls his shirt over his head. "We're on the same page. Now get naked and let's wash off before we turn into glue. Although being stuck to you for eternity does have its merits."

My mouth waters, and not from the flour, but from the sight of his chest with those defined muscles and incredible tattoos. One of which is my name.

Peeling our gluey clothes off isn't easy, our desire for each other making our fingers fumble. Finally he turns the water on and we step inside the bathtub/shower combo. It's not overly large, which forces us to be close and I have no problem with that. He turns us so I have the warm water to my back. With a bath sponge and soap, he washes my body, sending sparks and quivers with every inch he touches. Once he's determined my body is flour-free, he starts on my hair.

My eyes close and I purr from his fingers massaging the soap on my head. "If you ever consider a career change, you'd make a million as a shampoo boy."

He chuckles and hits a spot that makes me sigh. "No can do. These fingers only work on one particular beautiful woman's hair."

I grin with my eyes shut and reply, "Good. Then I don't have to kill you."

He chuckles again and once he's shampooed twice and conditioned, it's finally my turn. My hands itch to touch him. I forgo the sponge in favor of skin on skin. "I don't remember you this way. Your chest is so wide." My fingers, splayed and thumbs touching can't reach side to side.

He moans at my touch and suddenly I'm pinned against the shower tile with my hands above my head. My legs go around his waist, pulling him close as he thrusts his hips, hitting my clit and causing a gasp to burst from my lips.

"I can't wait," he hisses and thrusts harder. His mouth takes mine, parting my lips and owning me with his tongue.

Tilting my hips, I give us the friction we need. Pulling up and thrusting downward, his cock hits the perfect spot, setting fire to my core. He takes my mouth again, kissing me while I rub along his length. I want more. "I need you inside me."

"No. This is all you get. The first time we come together isn't going to be in a shower."

"But..."

His hips piston harder, his cock making me vibrate with my oncoming orgasm. "I'm close."

I pant, moving faster. His hands release mine and pinch my nipples, giving me the extra boost I need.

He grunts and bucks, pushing me against the tile as he drives against me, taking me higher and higher until I'm flying over the edge. I moan and he captures the sound, kissing me while riding my quaking tremors out.

With one last thrust, he shudders and falls against me, his spurts warming my stomach. His forehead falls to mine. "Best. Day. Ever."

I giggle. "Could we maybe move this to the bed?"

He carefully unwraps my legs and steadies me until I have my balance back. "After I clean you up."

What a wonderful way to get dirty. I highly recommend it. "You did make a mess. Oh, no. We have to finish the cookies!"

He growls his displeasure at having our plans foiled again. "Fine. We'll finish the cookies."

I reach up on my toes and kiss his chin. "And then you'll ravish me in bed?"

He pauses to consider and I'm not on board with the determined look taking over his face. "No. I owe you romance and flowers. I'm going to do this right."

My head drops to his chest and I feel like stamping my foot in a fit of temper. "I'm a sure thing, you know. All that's not necessary."

He tips my chin and kisses my lips lightly. "Yeah, it is. You mean something to me, Mac, and it's time I start proving that."

My insides flutter and as impatient as I am to be with him, it makes me feel special to know he wants to give me romance. "So you want to go on a date?"

"I do. Now, let's go finish those cookies and then you can walk me to the door, kiss me goodnight, and tomorrow, you're mine. Be ready at ten. How do you feel about going skiing?"

I haven't been skiing since high school. I still have the gear somewhere in the garage, but I have no idea if it still fits. "That sounds fun. I just hope I don't fall down the mountain and break my ass."

"No worries. I will protect your precious ass at all costs."

For the rest of the night, I float around finishing the baking on cloud nine. Having the right to touch Nash anytime I want and kiss him whenever the whim hits me is incredible. I never imagined my life could be this perfect. Somewhere in the back of my mind is a little black cloud counting the days until Christmas, reminding me of my love/hate relationship with the holiday.

The intelligent part of me knows the 25th of December isn't unlucky. It's just a date. A holiday. The fact that everything bad in my life has happened around that date is just a coincidence. There is less than a week left before Christmas and nothing bad has happened. In fact, something amazing happened this year. My streak of bad luck has been broken, right?

Nash makes good on his promise to kiss me goodnight at the door. He leaves me weak in the knees and frustrated as hell.

The next morning, I dig around in the garage and find my ski gear. Eighteen-year-old McKenna was a size or two smaller than the twenty-nine-year-old version. My mom's gear was packed away also and hers is a bit big on me, but it fits all the important parts.

That's the good thing about living in the mountains—we aren't far from some really good skiing. We spend most of the day on the slopes and have dinner at the lodge by a roaring fire. I think the day can't get any better, but then instead of heading down the mountain to come home, Nash informs me he rented a chalet for the night.

A very secluded chalet. A very rustic and romantic chalet.

When we drive up to the entrance, the outside lights are ablaze, welcoming us to the log and stone one-story rental.

After all the kissing and touching we've done all day long, the first thing to go when we close the front door behind us is our clothes. We only make it to the first bedroom, which turns out to have bunk beds, but we don't care. They serve the purpose very well indeed.

He still won't let us be together the way I wanted but, damn, the man has a talent for more than just singing with that mouth.

We don't even put clothes on afterward and just jump in the hot tub outside the primary suite on a lovely patio overlooking the mountains. Of course, it's dark tonight, but I bet in the light of day there's a killer view.

His mission of romancing me and making me feel like a princess is working. Grade A. I'll leave very positive reviews. I shift my leg and the water moves with a small wave lapping at us. I take a sip of the best wine I've ever tasted and sigh in pure bliss. "I think I must have one of these installed on the back deck."

He takes a sip of his beer and chuckles. "I knew we'd both be sore after skiing all day so I made sure the chalet had one."

I pick up one of the dates from the charcuterie board that had been left for us in the refrigerator and take a bite. Nash had positioned a table beside the hot tub and placed the treats on top so we could reach them. We don't even have to get out if we need refills or another tasty nibble. I lean back and chew, relishing this pampered life.

"Have you had any serious relationships?" I ask. It's something I've been wondering about more than I should. I'm just not sure I want to know the answer.

He sets his beer back on the table and levels his gaze at me. "Do you mean other than the ones the media made up? No, nothing serious."

"What's your life been like?" I could kick myself for asking, but I need to know. If we have any chance of making this work, I need the truth.

"You really want to hear this?"

Slowly I nod. “I think I have to hear it. From you. I don’t ever want to be blindsided.”

He nods in understanding, but his expression sobers. I put my hand over his, letting him know I’m with him. I have no idea what’s coming, but I know it’s going to be difficult to hear.

He takes my hand and starts to talk. “In the early days, there were lots of groupies. Too damn many. I experimented with drugs and soon discovered it wasn’t my thing. I drank too much alcohol and after a night when I woke up in bed with a woman I had no recollection of meeting, I vowed never again. Now I have an occasional beer or glass of wine with dinner, but I’ve never been drunk since.”

“Oh, my God.” I can’t imagine something like that happening, but the takeaway I need to remember is the man beside me is no longer the man he just described.

“I had a very brief affair with Holly Wynward.”

I read about that in the media. They made a gorgeous couple. She’s tall and voluptuous, and has the most stunning head of auburn hair that she swears has only been highlighted. The total opposite of me, but I refuse to feel inferior to a woman that’s no longer in the picture. “She’s beautiful.”

“She is and she’s sweet too. I could tell when our affair went from casual to her wanting more, and I never lied to her. I didn’t want a relationship and she knew that going in. So we amicably parted ways.”

There had been all types of rumors going around. She’d cheated on him, she’d caught him with another woman, and there was also a baby rumor. All lies. I wish I’d known that at the time. “The media made it sound like she was your great love. I was very jealous and scoured your social media pages for engagement announcements.”

He pulls me toward his lap and I float over. Taking my face in his hands, he looks into my eyes. “The only engagement for me will be with you, when you’re ready for that step.”

My heart jumps, hearing him say those words out loud. “You’re going there?”

“Of course I am. What did you think this thing between us is? Just a fling? No. Never. This is the real deal. If you want the truth, my life has been lonely, even surrounded by people most of the time. I’ve struggled being everything to everybody who wanted a piece of me with nothing left over for myself at the end of the day. I was beginning to wonder who I even am anymore. I’ve been empty inside. Coming home was my hope for change. Looking back on my life, the thing I missed most was you. I knew if I had any chance at happiness, it has to start with you.”

I shouldn’t get so much pleasure out of hearing about his challenges and anguish. I know what it’s like to not feel like you belong. “So you came home for me?”

“I did. Not knowing what I might find, but I had to try. The day you hit me with that bat was the luckiest day of my life.”

I’ll never live that down. I have a feeling we’ll be telling our children a version of that story long into the future. I get butterflies in my stomach just imagining being with Nash for the long haul. “But you didn’t think you were so lucky at the time.”

“That’s because I was stunned and my bell was ringing in my ears.”

We share a chuckle and then I rest my head on his chest and admit, “I played your songs all the time. It was the only way I could feel close to you. I’d pull up a song, close my eyes, and pretend you were singing just to me.”

He kisses the top of my head and tingles travel all the way to my toes. “I was, Mac. In some form, you are in almost every song I’ve ever written. I thought about you all the time. I’ve missed you.”

He wraps his arms around me. I tip my head, and he kisses my lips much too gently. “So, now you know it all. Are we still good?”

“We’ve both changed, Nash. For the better, I think. I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me.”

He stands with me still in his arms, and water rushes down our bodies. Words aren’t needed. I know what’s happening. I can’t take my eyes from his as he carries me inside. In the bathroom, he sits me down and turns the water on in the shower, testing its warmth.

We’ve done shower sex, but it’s not what either of us wants now. Quickly we rinse off, and he uses a soft, fluffy towel to dry us both. His cock hardens under my gaze and bobs as he finishes drying us off. He’s been blessed in the package department, more so than any man I’ve ever been with. I’ve never been into blow jobs, but my mouth waters to taste him. Not to return the favor from earlier, but a true desire to take him into my mouth and bring him pleasure.

Compelled by the unfamiliar urge, I drop to my knees, take him in hand, and run my tongue along the underside of his cock.

He groans through clenched teeth. “Mac,” he warns.

I glance up, my eyes on his, and take as much of his length deeply into my mouth as I can manage. His eyes narrow and his jaw tenses as his hands run through my hair, knocking loose the clip I’d used to keep it from getting wet and sending it flying across the room.

“Fuck, you’re good at that. I knew your mouth would be perfection swallowing me down.”

His praise causes a flood of wetness to leak down my legs. I press them together to ease the need to be touched.

“Mac, stop.”

I blink and look up at him.

“Baby, you’ve got to stop. It’s been a long time and I’m on a hair trigger here. I want to be inside you when we come.”

Yeah, I’ve heard that before and he didn’t listen to me either. I stroke him with my hand at the base of his cock while

sucking him down until he hits the back of my throat. His hands fist in my hair and his breathing becomes labored.

“God, Mac...good, so fucking...” His words fade away as his hands tighten in my hair. I quicken my pace and he takes over, using his grip on my head to thrust faster, never taking it deeper than I can handle.

“Mac...” His voice is thick and I double my efforts at taking him deeper, faster, and using my tongue to caress the vein on the bottom. His balls draw up.

“Mac!” He utters my name like it’s his last dying breath and his release shoots down my throat. He mumbles and curses as tremors cause him to jerk and stumble through the aftershocks.

He pulls me up and into his arms, and I’ve never felt more fulfilled as a woman. I know he’s been with other women. Plenty of other women that I don’t want to think about. But he couldn’t fake his response to what I was doing. I did this. I brought him pleasure.

“Mac, what the hell are you doing to me?” he murmurs against the top of my head.

“Did I do it wrong?” I reply lightheartedly.

He takes my chin in his hand and tips my head. “No, baby. You did everything right and that’s why I’m going to need a minute.”

“I’ve never been very good at that. But I’ve also never been that into it. I think that makes all the difference.”

“It turned you on, did it?” he asks as he once again carries me to the big bed and lays me on the top of the white, extra puffy duvet. I sink into the mattress and he follows me down, kissing me softly.

“You turn me on,” I murmur as he nuzzles my neck and kisses a path to my breast. His mouth and his hands send me spiraling. I know what’s finally going to happen and I’m not nervous or insecure like I would have been with someone else. This is Nash. I’ve waited most of my life for tonight.

I reach for him and our eyes lock as he shifts, lowering his body to cover mine. I hold my breath, gripping his forearms as he slides in, bringing our bodies together. He pauses and we smile. Tears fill my eyes for absolutely no reason.

“You okay, sweetheart?”

I nod, overcome with emotions. “I’m...perfect. Absolutely perfect.”

His heart beats against mine, the warmth of his skin pressed against mine, and he fills me completely.

“I love you, McKenna.” His voice breaks, which only makes me love him more. He feels it too. He knows the detours and trials we’ve been through to get here where we’ve always belonged—in each other’s arms.

He takes my mouth and kisses me, sharing the moment and the love. I let myself go and simply feel the magic only Nash can perform on my body. With each thrust and slide of his tongue against mine, I fall deeper and deeper in love with this incredible man.

Soon our need for each other escalates and turns into burning, white-hot desperation. Our tongues duel, and fingers grasp, and each thrust is harder and faster than the one before. Our skin glows from exertion as our moans of desire fill the room.

I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer with my heels. He grabs a pillow and stuffs it under my hips, adjusting the angle. My eyes widen when his next thrust goes even deeper.

My inner muscles start to tremble and I reach up and bite the sinewed cord of his neck. Later I’ll be completely shocked that I went to that level of passion.

“Mac...” he growls.

The demanding tone in his voice is enough to send us both over the edge and right into a fireworks-grade climax. There are kisses, and words of endearment, and gasps for breath and then, once our lust has cooled, he takes my face in his hands and shocks me speechless when he says, “Marry me, Mac.”

Crickets.

More crickets.

The loving light in his eyes is slowly fading and I'm losing him. Why can't I speak? This is what I've always wanted. Since I was old enough to think of Nash in a more mature way, I've dreamed of hearing those words. Why can't I say a simple three-letter word?

A buzzing noise comes from the bathroom. My phone is in my handbag that's sitting on the kitchen counter. Nash doesn't make a move toward the sound and his gaze doesn't leave mine.

Waiting.

The phone stops ringing and still our eyes are locked. I open my mouth to say something. What, I'm not sure, but the phone going off again saves me. "Shouldn't you get that?"

"No." He makes no attempt to move. "Nothing and no one is more important than you."

My heart somersaults. "But it could be your mom," I point out.

"My mom would have called the other phone. That's work. You are more important than anything or anyone on the other end of that call."

I nod and bite my lip. The phone finally silences. I've got to say *something*. I cup his cheek with my palm. I'm being silly. Of course, I'll marry him. "I love you, Nash. I always have."

His head tips. "I'm not hearing a yes in there."

Before I can correct his misassumption, his phone goes off *again* and he curses and rolls to the side.

Immediately, I miss his touch. "Go answer it."

With a spew of creative expletives, he pushes off the bed and walks to the bathroom in all his naked glory.

Damn, that man is hot.

He has the tightest ass and the cutest dimples just above each cheek. I sit up, scoot to sit with my back against the headboard, and pull the cover up to my neck. Without Nash's body heat to keep me warm, I'm chilled.

What's my problem? Yes. Of course the answer is yes.

I only have a few minutes to process all that's happened. The answer he wants is yes and that's the one he'll get. Then why did I hesitate? Because I was shocked he'd ask me at that particular moment. It shouldn't have made a difference when or where he asked. The important thing is he asked.

But did he mean it? Is that my issue? Do I subconsciously think he was only carried away by the intensity of our release and he blurted it out impulsively?

Of all the scenarios going around in my head, that's the one that makes the most sense.

My eyes shift to the bathroom, the biggest grin on my face. When he comes back, I'll give him a very big *yes*. My heart is racing and I wish he'd hurry.

The conversation going on in the bathroom becomes louder and heated, and while I can't make out what he's saying, I can tell by the tone of his voice that he isn't happy with whoever is on the other end.

The frustration on his face when he comes back in the bedroom only confirms my suspicion. Somebody pissed him off.

"What's wrong?" I ask. My heart drops when he ignores me and starts pulling on his clothes. His entire body language is tense and closed off. I don't know this Nash.

He zips his pants and sits down in a chair by the window to pull his socks and shoes on. "Don't worry about it. Just get dressed. We've got to go."

I grab the sheet and crawl to sit on the edge of the bed. "Go? It's the middle of the night."

He collects his wallet and keys from the bureau top. "I have to fly back to California."

My mouth drops. “Tonight? Is there even a flight available?”

Pulling on his coat, he starts for the door. “I’ll be flying private.”

“You have your own plane?”

He pauses at the door. “Hurry up. I’ll be waiting in the car.”

His face is devoid of the earlier soft, loving emotions, and I wonder if he even sees me. He’s already miles away, and that hurts more than my fragile heart can take. His backside going out the door leaves me feeling more than deserted.

“What just happened?” I ask the empty room. The same room where, only a few minutes ago, I’d experienced two life-changing events—making love to Nash for the first time and receiving a proposal.

In the space of only minutes, I experienced the highest of highs and crashing lows.

Confused and running on auto-pilot, I scurry around pulling my clothes on and making sure I have everything I came in with, which isn’t much. We were only going to be here for one magical night.

The car is running and he sits behind the wheel impatiently drumming his fingers on it as I lock the door and put the key back in the dropbox. As soon as I get in, I put my hand on his thigh. He looks down and then up at me. He doesn’t cover my hand with his or give me any comforting contact. It’s like he’s checked out.

“Nash, talk to me. I know something on the call upset you.”

His hands tighten on the steering wheel. “I can’t Mac. Nothing in my life is ever going to touch you. I promise you that. I’ll do whatever I need to do to protect you.”

My brows pull together because he’s wrong. “Everything in your life is going to not only touch me, but it’s going to

become a part of me. That's what marriage means. Or did you only ask me that in the heat of the moment?"

He shrugs casually as if it doesn't matter and that's my first hint that whatever happened threatens our happiness. My second is when he remarks, "Then it's a good thing you said no."

I fall back against the seat. "I didn't say no," I manage to choke out past the huge lump of emotions clogging my throat.

"You sure as hell didn't say yes. I guess that makes you the smarter of the two of us."

I gasp, his harsh remark hurting more than I should allow. "Nash. Help me understand what's happening. I'm lost here and I feel you pulling away. Talk to me."

He shakes his head firmly, his jaw tense. "I can't, McKenna. I have to go back to California to take out the trash once and for all. The problem with trash is sometimes it stinks so bad you can't get rid of the smell. I won't allow you to be caught up in any of the filth that might be coming my way."

Such a cryptic explanation. What am I supposed to do with that? "You know, to use your own metaphor, that's garbage, right?"

One side of his mouth curls, giving me hope that my Nash is somewhere mired deep down inside. "We'll face challenges all our lives. But we can get through anything as long as we're together."

He barks out an angry laugh. "I used to believe that. I still want to believe it, but I don't know if that's possible."

A cold chill makes me shiver. He leans over and turns the heat higher. That small, thoughtful gesture also gives me hope. I know with everything I am that he's doing what he thinks is right, not what he wants to do. Something or someone is calling the shots. This isn't Nash.

"You're leaving me. Again. Will it be ten more years before I see you again?"

Another shrug of indifference. “If I have to lose you to protect you, then it’s not really a choice. You’ll win, hands down.”

My head jerks to face him. “But I win nothing without you. Something has happened and you need me. Why won’t you admit that?”

Ignoring my plea, he looks in the rearview mirror and puts the car in reverse. “Buckle up. We need to go.”

The ride back down the mountain is mostly silent. Even when I try to ask what’s wrong or start a conversation, he shuts me out.

Maybe I got it wrong. Is his mood and refusal to talk because of the phone call... or because I wasn’t jumping with joy over his proposal? Is he punishing me? I don’t believe that, but a niggling feeling of insecurity start to trickle in.

When we get home, he doesn’t even walk me to the door. He leaves the car running and places my ski gear by the garage. My cheek gets brushed by a kiss at least before he drives away. Tears stream down my face, making it difficult to unlock the door.

I ask myself again what the hell just happened?

“Where’s Nash?” a voice asks from behind me.

I scream, grab the nearest weapon—an umbrella—and spin around raising it over my head. “Mom? What are you doing here? I could have hit you!”

She takes the umbrella from my still-trembling hands and puts it back by the door. “I hear you have a knack for that. I’m here for Nash’s parents. Trish called and said she’s been trying to reach Nash, but he’s not answering his phone. I didn’t know you were going to be out this late and I fell asleep on the couch.”

“Oh. He’s on his way to the airport. Why does she need to talk to him? Are they okay?”

“They’re fine.” Her lips thin in distaste. “Nash’s Uncle Frank is causing trouble again. They wanted to warn Nash.”

Finally, I understand. It's that man again. He always pushed Nash and now I know he was the one responsible for breaking us up. I don't like him and I certainly don't trust him. Something's happened and Frank is back to his old tricks. Not this time. "Do you know what's going on?"

"I don't, but I do know that Frank is bad news. He's always been jealous of Nash's success."

My back stiffens and a calm resolve filters through me. I'll be damned if I allow it to happen again. This time I'm fighting back. With a baseball bat if needed. "Mom, can you call Trish? I need information. It looks like I'm going to California."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



NASH

“I don’t give a fuck, Ford. Call the police and have the man arrested for trespassing. I don’t want him in my house. How the hell did he get in anyway?”

An idiot in a Prius pulls in front of me and, of course, slows down. After having to land in Ohio because the equivalent of a check engine light coming on, which resulted in a two-hour delay, it feels as if the universe is against me.

“Your security guard called. He said a man showed up, identified himself as your uncle, and had a key. He allowed him in, but called me when he couldn’t get you on the phone. As you know, I tried to call you earlier, but you didn’t answer. Listen, it’s my recommendation that you listen to the man before you give him the boot. He says he could ruin you. There’s no telling what the crazy loon thinks he has on you.”

I make a mental note to fire the security guard. Frank’s name is on the NE—no entry—list. He shouldn’t have needed to call. “Again, I don’t fuckin’ care.”

“Man, you need to hear him out. Then we can take him down.”

“That’s why I dropped everything and flew home. He’s messed with my life enough. I let him go quietly before, but this time I want to throw the book at him.”

When I started in this business, my uncle was my mentor. He guided me and taught me how to navigate a fickle man-eat-man business. What he forgot to teach me was not to trust the people closest to me.

“And we can. But we need to know what he has or what he thinks he has.”

That’s what I’ve been contemplating all night long. What could he possibly have? Why demand to see me? “More like what he made up or had tampered with to make me look bad.”

“I don’t put anything past the man. Where are you?”

I put on my turn signal to exit the highway. “I’m almost home. Thanks for having Cory leave my car at the airport.”

“Sure, man. Do you want me there?”

“No. I don’t need help in handling my uncle.”

Ford chuckles and remarks, “I meant to keep you from killing him.”

My jaw clenches. “That’s a strong possibility. He’s cost me too much already.”

“How goes it with your girl?”

I can’t answer him because I don’t know. Considering the way I treated her, she may never speak to me again, and I wouldn’t blame her. When I heard Frank was making himself at home in my house, I lost it. After everything he did and the pain he caused, for him to just show up like nothing happened made me see red. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll call you after I talk to him.”

“Yeah, okay. Call me especially if I need to notify the police.” Then he tacks on, “Or the undertaker.”

I end the call and scrub a hand down my face to clear the heavy exhaustion. I don’t even remember the last time I slept. The image of Mac’s teary face when I left her haunts my every thought. It wrecked me seeing the hurt in her eyes. How fucked up is it that I asked her to marry me on the same night my uncle demanded to see me? He’s the reason we didn’t get

together back then and now history is repeating itself. What a fucking mess.

“Fuck!” I curse, slamming my hand on the steering wheel. Why did that asshole have to slither into my life again? When I caught him in lies and skimming off the top of sales, I gave him an option to go quietly or be charged and convicted. He would have done time as well as have his dirty laundry dragged out in the media.

My record company management talked me into paying him off and allowing him to leave unpunished because it would cause the fewest ripples with my career. I’d wanted to throw the book at him and I didn’t give a damn about making waves. The thought of my dad having to witness me going through a lengthy trial with his brother kept me silent.

Because he was family, I gave him a million bucks and washed my hands of him. He has a lot to answer for. The number one being splitting me and Mac up that night and then letting me believe she was living her best life with someone else.

Stealing my money, I could possibly forgive. Taking away the one woman I will always love, not once but twice, is unpardonable. This time, he’s going to burn. I’m through playing his games or giving him any say over my life.

I turn into my drive, wait for the gate to open, and pull into the garage. I find him in the living room, making himself comfortable with a glass of my best scotch.

“Nash, my boy! Good of you to join me.”

The man has aged. He’s four years older than my dad, but he looks much older. He’s completely gray now and carrying at least twenty extra pounds.

“What the hell, Frank? Say your piece and get out. I don’t jump because you say to anymore.”

“Fine, if that’s the way you want to play it.” With the glass in hand, he points behind me.

I turn to find at least a dozen photos taped to the wall. I take a step closer, and my stomach threatens to erupt as I study

each incriminating picture. They are all of me at different points during my career. In every one is a different woman and, due to the compromising positions we're in, little is left to the imagination as to what we're doing. Most I don't recognize, but one woman stands out. It's from the night I got wasted and woke up beside her.

My hands fist to the point of puncturing my palms with my fingernails, his plan becoming clear. I also bet he knows about Mac and that's why he picked this particular time to make his move. He probably knows I'll do anything to protect her. Then he confirms my assumption.

"I hear you and that pretty little girl are back together."

I turn and have to hold myself back from attacking the man that's supposed to be family. How he and my dad are brothers has always mystified me. They are nothing alike. "You wouldn't know anything about breaking us up, would you?"

He chuckles and takes a sip of scotch. "Well, I might. I did you a favor. You wouldn't have the fame you do now if I hadn't put a stop to your little crush back then. I saw the writing on the wall. You would have married her and had a kid or two, and then you would have been history in the music industry. Just another talent show winner who had one hit and disappeared from the scene."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But it wasn't your decision to make. I was just a puppet to you. You saw me as no more than a cash cow and a way to make yourself feel important. You were playing with my life and my happiness, and you never gave a shit about me."

In reply, he shrugs with a smirk and takes another drink. I never realized the level of hatred I have for the man until this moment. "Tell me what you want and get out."

"Five million," he announces with a proud-of-himself smile and points to the wall again. "And all that goes away."

But it won't. He won't ever go away unless I stop him. My future with Mac disappears before my eyes. I can't have her

involved with this mess—ever. The only way to put an end to his madness is to cut him off at the knees.

“Get out,” I snap. In the next breath, the front door slams open, hitting the wall, and a charging angel comes barreling into the room. A slightly disarrayed angel.

“Mac?”

She rushes in, still in the sweater and jeans I left her in last night except her sweater is ripped in several places and her beautiful hair is flying wildly around her shoulders. She straightens her sweater and tosses her hair behind her back.

I raise a brow in question. She smiles and tugs again at her sweater, making one of the rips longer. “Your mom called your label and they happened to have a plane in the area. It’s true what they say, once you fly private, you never want to go back. And then your guy at the gate wouldn’t let me in. So I climbed the fence.” She looks adorable, all mussed but still somehow elegant. I’ve never loved her more.

“Am I too late to the party? It was rude of you not to invite me, Nash.” That’s when she turns and sees the pictures on the wall. My heart rips in two. This is when she’ll walk out the door and I’ll never see her again.

“That’s right, little lady. Nash here is very popular with the females.”

Mac whips around and levels a glare at Frank. For the first time since I walked in the door, I see a crack in his facade.

“You”—Mac points a finger at him—“are a disgrace. You’re supposed to be family. Family doesn’t do this.” Her finger moves to the pictures.

“It is what it is. I didn’t make him fuck any of those women.”

“Shut your mouth, Frank,” I spit out.

Unfazed, Mac turns to me. “I assume he wants a boatload of money to keep this from hitting the media.”

I nod. “Five million.”

Her face screws up like she ate something repulsive. “Typical. Very cliché of you, Uncle Frank.”

She spins around and yanks each picture from the wall, marches over to Frank, and tosses them in his lap. “Go for it. Those pictures were taken long ago, before he got a certain tattoo on his chest. You think this will ruin him? All you’re going to do is cement his rock star persona. Everybody knows he slept around. Hell, everybody expected this behavior. What you didn’t expect was for me to stand by Nash and support him if you went public. That will be the image to stick with his fans.”

“Mac,” I start to explain it’s not that cut and dried, but she shuts me up with a death glare.

“I’m not finished with you yet either,” she says sternly and I fall even deeper in love with her.

She addresses Frank once again. “Now, I believe my fiancé asked you to leave.”

She pulls her phone from her pocket. “Or should I call the police to help take out the garbage?”

Without another word, Frank drops his glass on the coffee table and slinks out, leaving the pictures behind. Once the front door closes, I’m left with a very angry woman. I’m grinning as she lights into me. I even chuckle as I pull her into my arms. When I take her lips, she’s clinging to me and when I lay her down on my bed, she looks up at me with such love in her eyes that tears come to my own.

“My avenging angel.” I’m so in love with this woman. She has my heart and soul.

She takes my face between her hands. “Never shut me out again.”

I need to say, “The pictures... I’m sorry.”

Slowly she shakes her head. “You have nothing to apologize for. That was half a decade ago. I’m not thrilled about them, but they’re not a deal breaker. What matters is what happens going forward.”

“You have every right to be angry. I acted like an ass last night. I tried to keep you out of the sordid part of my life. I didn’t want to hurt you or to disappoint you, and that’s exactly what I ended up doing. You’re my world, sweetheart, and I’m sorry I made you feel as if you don’t belong. There’s no excuse for how I acted last night after the phone call.”

“I appreciate your apology and I understand you were trying to protect me. But don’t ever do that again.”

“Never,” I vow, right before my lips cover hers in a long, slow kiss, flaming the desire we’d banked at the chalet. As the kiss ends, she whispers, “More.”

“A lifetime of mores.” Again I take her lips in a soul-searing kiss that leaves us both breathless. When I look into her eyes, the emotion I find there knocks me off-center. All the stress and tension that had weighed me down since the phone call last night melts away. “I love you, Mac.”

“Show me how much,” she says, her voice laden with passion.

In seconds flat, our clothes end up on the floor and I’m kissing her hungrily, both of us desperate for each other. I cover her and still, gazing down into those vivid green eyes that have always seen right into my heart. She grins up at me as my hardness nudges against her warm entrance.

“Are you going to propose to me again?”

“Nope. You already said I was your fiancé. I’m not giving you a chance to back out. I’m sure your declaration would hold up in a court of law.”

“Good thing I don’t want to get out of it. Just so we’re clear, the answer is yes. Always yes. I should have said it last night.”

“Good answer.” Lowering, I take her mouth in a kiss as I slide deep inside, bringing us together in the closest way possible. She tilts her hips and I sink deeper. Together we rock and thrust until our heated skin beads with the glow of our lovemaking. Harder and faster I thrust, her nails biting into the flesh of my back.

“Good,” I hiss. “So fucking good.”

Reaching between us, I pinch her clit, “I’m...coming,” she gasps moments before she explodes, tremors of sensation going off around my cock.

With a final hard thrust inward, my own powerful release follows with a chant of, “Mac. Mac. Mac.”

Long after our skin has cooled and our breath has returned to normal, I still hold her in my arms, gently caressing her shoulder with my thumb. I don’t want to wait for anything else to come between us. We’ve waited too long already. I know it’s crazy, but it feels right. “How about getting married on Christmas Eve?”

CHAPTER TWELVE



MCKENNA

“No. Absolutely not.” I cross my arms and raise a brow in the direction of my fiancé, trying to keep my focus on what’s in his hands instead of his delicious body covered only by a towel riding low on his hips. “I’m not going to be the most hated woman in the world.”

He takes a step closer, playing me with his dazzling white smile. “Come on, Mac. It’s just a haircut. You used to do it all the time.”

He holds the scissors and clippers out to me like an offering, but I refuse to take them. “That was before you became Nash Hudson, rock star. If I cut your hair, every woman in the world will hate me even more because, number one,”—I raise my pointer finger for emphasis—“I’m taking you off the market and”—a second finger pops up—“taking away their eye candy if I cut your hair.”

He chuckles and steps even closer. We’ve just spent the night and morning doing the rock and roll, sheet edition, and I want him again.

“It’s just hair and I’ve wanted a haircut for a really long time. What better reason than to cut it for the wedding?”

“I still can’t believe we’re getting married tomorrow at the Christmas Ball.” I shudder to think how much money he dropped to make that happen. We flew from California, on his

plane, to New York, where he bought me the most beautiful ring. Once Nash got his assistant Cory on the job, designers were falling all over themselves to create my wedding gown. In four days' time. Unbelievable and extremely Cinderella-ish. Nash's fame comes with lots of perks that I'm not sure I want to get used to.

We called our parents from his house before we left. They were excited and happy for us, but I honestly think they were more excited to plan and execute our wedding on short notice. Our only request was something small and meaningful. We didn't want a big, lavish ceremony. They compromised by inviting the whole town at the Christmas Ball.

"Do you like my long hair?" he asks, and I try to keep my face neutral. "See, you don't like it either."

I don't. I really don't, but millions do and I have to respect his career. "I think it's a big step."

"It is, but it's one I've wanted to do for a long time. It's not just my hair that's going to change. I'm tired of writing and performing music the label wants. It's time I do what I want and that means doing it my way with my music." He tugs on a strand of his trademark silky hair. "It starts with the hair."

We've talked about his discontentment with his career. He should be writing and performing songs he believes in. "Fine. You're right. I don't love the long hair. But I'm still not going to cut it; however, I know somebody that will."



With a sniffle, another lock of hair falls from Nash's head. It's caught in adoring hands and gently placed in a plastic zipper bag, along with the rest of the cut hair, for safekeeping. My gaze meets Nash's and he sends a silent *help me* message.

I grin and try, "Robert, stop crying. You're going to slip with the scissors and cut his ear off."

Sniff, sniff. “I can’t help it. This beautiful hair. Once this hits the media, a day of mourning will be declared. Women and men everywhere will light candles in memory of your shorn locks. When you showed up at my door this morning, I didn’t think you’d be this cruel to me.”

My brows knit together at his melodramatic sorrow. I’m not fooled. My assistant may be Nash’s biggest fan of all times, or FOAT as he has named himself, but I know the man’s predilection for making a dollar. He started cutting hair in high school to make money for his high-dollar taste in designer clothes. “You’re going to sell his hair, aren’t you?”

With a gasp of astonishment, Robert grabs his chest. Luckily with the hand not wielding the scissors. “Never. This is going in the vault in a hermetically sealed box. I would never entertain the thought of selling Nash Hudson’s world-renowned hair.”

“You’ve already got it listed, don’t you?” Nash asks flatly.

With a sly grin, Robert shrugs “I’m doing the fans of Nash Hudson a solid. Keeping it to myself would be greedy and selfish.”

As Robert snips away, cutting Nash’s hair into what he claims is a perfect style for his cheekbones and to accentuate his dreamy eyes, those eyes are locked on me. A shiver of excitement runs down my spine. A simple look from him does it for me.

Little by little, the man of my memories comes back into view. Nash’s fans are so wrong. Yes, his long hair was sexy-gorgeous, but Nash with short hair is perfection.

I love you, he mouths and I melt. In less than twenty-four hours, this man will become my husband. I’d like to go right back home and spend the day in bed, but our moms gave us a list of last-minute things we have to take care of. We’ll be running around town doing errands instead of what we both would rather be doing.

Tonight, we’re getting together with our parents and a few friends for a rehearsal dinner of sorts. The moms insisted we

need one. Nash's dad is going to be his best man and Casey will be my matron of honor. The two of them constitute the entirety of our wedding party. Ford, Nash's manager, is an ordained minister and is going to marry us.

I don't even have tonight to look forward to because the moms also put their foot down and demanded Nash stay at his own home tonight. I won't even get to sleep in his arms. I doubt I'll be able to sleep anyway, so filled with excitement and a few dregs of remaining concern. It's been a long time since the holidays have given me something that will become a good memory.

Honestly, the wedding fell into place like the universe is making up for all the crappy things that have happened during the holidays in the past. I'm willing to forgive... as long as Nash makes it to this Christmas Ball.

Still snipping away, Robert asks, "So, McKenna, I don't want to talk about work, but you know I'm worrying over what's going to happen to your shop."

My head tilts to one side. "What do you mean? We'll reopen after the New Year just like we planned."

"So you two plan to live here and you'll have time to devote to running the store?"

The smile on my face dims. I hadn't really thought about it. I've been so caught up in everything Nash, my regular life has been pushed to the background. My eyes go to Nash. We've never talked about where we'll live. It stands to reason that it can't be here. His house is in California.

Everything I've worked so hard to achieve is here.

I worry my bottom lip as Robert takes the towel from around Nash's neck and deems him a masterpiece.

Nash thanks him and pulls the list from our moms out of his pocket. "Thanks, man, for the haircut. I'll give you a thousand bucks if you'll take care of the things on this list."

Robert takes the list and reads, "Cake testing, pick out napkins from Delaney's, stop by florist for final say, pick up dress from airport." He stops in the middle of the list and looks

up at Nash. “These decisions should be made by you two. It’s your wedding.”

“It is, but you know what Mac likes. My girl and I need to talk and we won’t have a chance if we’re running all over town for the rest of the day.”

“Ahhh, got it. That’s very romance hero of you. I’ll do it and you don’t even have to pay me. Well, I’d love tickets to your next concert. Backstage passes would be amazing too. You know, since I’m your FOAT.”

The sick feeling in my stomach lessens when Nash hands over the list and then complains, “It’s yours, but you’ve got to work on that name.”

As Nash takes my hand, we thank Robert. Back in the car, I ask, “Where are we going?”

He sighs. Since our parents took over our houses, originally their homes, we have few choices. It’s freezing outside so that limits us to someplace indoors. Preferably by a fire. He chuckles and starts the car. “I know the perfect place.”

It takes less than thirty minutes before he pulls off the highway onto a dirt road. I’m confused with where he’s going. There’s nothing out here but the Jenson’s farmland where they plant and harvest hay and corn for their cows. He slows and then stops in the middle of nowhere.

“What are we doing here? Don’t you think we need some heat? It’s freezing outside.”

He grins. “Don’t you remember this place?”

Looking out the windshield, I see nothing but a plowed field. My gaze wanders over the landscape and that’s when I see it and the memories flood in. We’d sneak out here and have secret meetings, or I’d just listen to him play his guitar as we spun dreams of our future. “The deer stand.”

“Not just any deer stand it’s more a deer hunting blind box hut. You know I found out that Mr. Jenson tricked it out to get away from Mrs. Jenson. I doubt he ever spotted a single deer. Do you think it’s all still there?”

“One way to find out. I’m game if you are.” I’m glad I wore my boots today.

One summer, when he was sixteen, Nash helped Mr. Jenson on the farm and found this place. We started sneaking away as often as we could.

We have to walk across to the other side of the field near the tree line. Nash goes up first, saying he’ll protect me from any hibernating animals.

I look up the ladder and he peeks over the hole in the floor of the hut. “Come on up.”

He watches as I climb and then takes my hand at the top. Other than being covered in a layer of dirt, everything is exactly as I remember. The area can’t be more than six feet by six feet. We could lie down and Nash’s feet and head would touch two sides. A four-shelf bookcase sits against one wall with all sorts of items to while away an afternoon. Books, checkers, puzzles, there’s even a stack of wood beside the small woodstove. In no time, Nash has the fire going and I take a rag I found to give the floor a good scrubbing. There’s a chair and a small table, but we always sat on the floor.

Nash sits with his back against the wall and pulls me down on his lap.

“Why have we never talked out what our lives will look like after we’re married? That’s messed up, right?”

“No, not really messed up. We’ve just had other things on our minds,” Nash counters.

“Yeah, more like we can’t keep our hands off each other long enough to consider the ramifications of being together. What are we going to do? Your life is in California and mine is here. I’ve built my business from the ground up and I don’t want to walk away from it.”

“I would never ask you to give up something you’ve worked so hard to build. Let me ask you this—is it your mom you don’t want to leave or the place?”

“Well, Mom is happy here. She loves living at the retirement community, and she’s made so many friends there. I

wouldn't ask her to leave. My business is just a building... I suppose I could relocate, but I imagine my expenses would triple. I'm not sure it would be a lucrative move. And then there's Robert. I could never ask him to uproot his life to move across the country."

"You said you only do the designs now. Could you promote Robert and let him take over your shop while you work from home? Our home in California."

Our home. I love the sound of that. I'm just not sure the huge house he lives in would ever feel like home. "I could, but I'd miss the hands-on selection of fabric and bringing my designs to life. There's a lot of back and forth with the seamstresses."

"What if we split our time between Cali and here? I'm already going to cut down on tours but maybe you can go with me, or meet me when your schedule allows."

"You'd do that? Have two homes? And yes, I'd love to go with you. I could make plans to work remotely."

"Don't you get it, Mac? I'd do anything for you. If it makes you happy, then that's our plan."

"It's perfect. You know, our parents aren't expecting us back until much later. Whatever are we going to do with the bonus time?"

He flips me around so I'm facing him, straddling his legs. "Oh, I can think of a few things. Want to christen old man Jenson's deer stand?"

"As long as we can keep most of our clothes on. It's cold and dirty."

"I don't see a problem with that."

He takes my mouth in a searing kiss and we don't climb down the ladder until almost dark. They were the best stolen moments I've ever experienced.



I don't let Casey get a foot in the door of the community center dressing room before I ask, "Is he here yet?" for the fifth time.

My best friend gives me a sympathetic smile. "I spoke to his mom and she said when they left to come here, Nash was dressing. He's on his way, sweetie. He'll be here."

I turn back and look in the vanity mirror. The face staring back at me looks tense and filled with worry. When I woke up alone this morning, an unsettled feeling took up residence in my belly. A premonition of things to come? A memory of how things went wrong on this same day ten years ago? Or simply wedding jitters like Mom and Casey have been saying all day long.

I just need to see him. I need to touch him and make sure he's real and this—our wedding—is real.

My hand brushes down my beautiful gown. It's stunning in its simple elegance. I chose a classic and timeless bateau neckline with a cutaway back and long sleeves. There's not an inch of lace or pearls anywhere. The white crushed velvet fabric is the star of the gown. Since we're getting married outside in the dead of winter, the matching coat will be what steals the show as I walk down the aisle.

The long fur-lined white coat has a standup collar and a scooped train. Eve Coll, the designer, was excited to be asked for a wedding coat. She'd never had an opportunity to design one. It's gorgeous and will keep me toasty warm, along with the two dozen stand heaters surrounding the area set aside for the ceremony.

A lot of people in town pitched in and helped decorate the patio of the community center. We're getting married outside by the lake with a view of the mountains as the backdrop. I haven't seen it lit up with twinkle lights yet, but I imagine it's going to be an incredible sight.

After the wedding, we'll join the Christmas Ball that will be going on inside the center and celebrate with everyone.

I check the time. “Is he here yet?” I ask Casey. Her shoulders droop and she marches to the door. She knows the only thing that will pacify me is if she goes to check.

Five long minutes later she’s back, and the look on her face causes my heart to drop.

“I’m sorry, honey. Nobody has seen him. I sent David outside to look for his car and he said it’s not here.”

I look up at my friend, willing her to put my insecurities to rest. “He’s not coming.”

She rushes over and takes my hands. “McKenna, stop it. He’s coming. He’s just running a little late.”

I want to believe her.

I check my phone. I even pull up our message thread. The last message I sent asking where he is stares back at me unanswered. No matter how long I look, those little bouncing dots don’t appear. “Where could he be?”

“I don’t know, but I know he loves you and I know he will be here. There’s nothing that would keep that man from marrying you.”

My gaze goes back to my phone. Nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



NASH

“Can’t this go any faster?” I yell above the noise of... two horsepower.

“This *is* fast,” old man Jenson says with a chuckle. “You youngsters are used to putting the pedal to the metal and scooter-pooting down the road at breakneck speeds.”

I scrub my hand down my face and want to scream. If it would make the horses go any faster, that’s exactly what I’d do. Of all the days, it had to be this one that I lost control of my car on a patch of black ice and spun out down into a ditch.

No big deal, right? Just call somebody. Only my phone was nowhere to be found in the jumbled-up insides of the car as it lies tipped on its side.

“You’re bleeding again,” Mr. Jenson remarks and points to my forehead.

I can feel a trickle of blood oozing from the cut. I must have hit my head on the rearview mirror. I swipe it away with a finger. “Do you have the time?”

Instead of pulling a watch out, the man looks at the sky. “I’d say it’s around 6:30.”

Great! I was supposed to be there an hour ago. What is Mac going to think? I feel sick to my stomach. She’s going to think I’m not coming. Just like before. “Are you sure you don’t have a cellphone?”

The man cuts his eyes at me. “You hard of hearing now? I told you I don’t believe in those things. You’re lucky I found you.”

So lucky that the only way he could get me to town was by the horse and wagon that he uses to take kids on hayrides at Halloween. I remember in elementary school being so excited to go on field day to pick out a pumpkin and to ride like the pioneers did. Now the ride isn’t so thrilling. I glance at the barren road in front of us, begging a car to appear.

There’s nothing I can do but sit on a hard bench with two asses in front of me and a grumpy old man beside me.

“Molly and Polly aren’t used to being out this late. They’re usually tucked in their nice warm stalls munching on hay and oats by this time.”

What? Am I supposed to apologize to the horses for disturbing their evening? “Yeah, and I’m supposed to be getting married.”

His head whips around and he asks, “What?”

I brush away another trickle of blood and explain, “My wedding. At least I hope my wedding is still going to happen if I ever get there. She may be so mad she’ll call the whole thing off.”

“You marrying that little girl you used to spend time with in my deer stand?”

My mouth drops open. “How did you know about that?”

He chuckles. “You really think I’m the game and puzzle type of man?”

It takes me a minute to get his meaning. “You stocked the stand with things for us?”

He shrugs. “Just hoping to give you options of things to do instead of things you shouldn’t be doing.”

I would like to tell him that Mac and I have never used his stand for anything clandestine, but as of yesterday, that’s no longer a true statement. My lips pull into what I’m sure is a well-satisfied smirk from the memories. Instead, I tell him,

“Yes, I’m marrying McKenna. Hopefully. If she’ll still have me.”

He takes his cap off and scratches his bald head before putting it back on. “I wouldn’t worry about that. She’ll wait for the right one. I always knew she was the one for you. Just like I new my Vivi was the one for me.”

That has me turning to ask, “How did you know?”

He gives a rolling chuckle. “Easy, you don’t marry a woman you can live with, you marry the one you can’t live without.”

I turn back to the ass view and nod in total agreement. That sums up the way I feel about Mac to a T. Notes start filtering into my head as lyrics line up and match the timing as the start of a song begins to form.

“Well, we can’t have you late now, can we?” he says just before he cracks the reigns over the horses’ backsides and yells, “Get up, girls.”

The buggy lurches, and the notes in my head are jarred away as I grab the wood seat to keep from being tossed out of another vehicle, and like a bullet we take off at warp speed. Not really, but compared to the moseying speed of a few seconds ago, this feels like warp speed.

I’m bumped and jerked as the buggy flies down the road, rocking us from side to side. The only sound is the horses’ hooves against the pavement in a staccato beat while their harnesses play percussion to the tune.

The ridiculousness of the situation causes me to throw my head back and laugh. I couldn’t make this stuff up if I tried.

It still takes too long to arrive, but I thank Mr. Jenson profusely before I jump down from the buggy and run right into the events center. I bypass all the milling crowd and I don’t stop and answer anybody who calls my name. My sole focus is to get to Mac. What she must be going through.

“Where is she,” I ask my mom, who’s standing in the hallway.

“Nash, are you okay? You’re bleeding.”

“It doesn’t matter. I need to see Mac.”

“She’s in there.” She points to the last door on the left.

I jog a few more steps and don’t bother knocking as I burst into the room. And there she is. Standing by the window with tears in her eyes. “Nash!” she cries and runs to me.

Once my arms are wrapped around her, my heart begins to calm. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Mac.”

She leans back and notices the blood on my face. “You’re hurt.”

I brush her concerns away. “It’s nothing. I’ll explain later. This is what’s important.” I take her mouth in a slow, sweet kiss that ends much too soon for both of us. She clings to my mussed and ripped tuxedo and my world rights itself.

She looks up at me with love shining from her eyes. “Want to get married?”

I look down into the eyes of the woman I can’t live without. “There’s nothing I want more,” I lay another kiss on her lips.

Taking my hand, she leads me from the room. “Then let’s get to it.”

“Aren’t you supposed to meet me at the altar?”

She shakes her head, a mischievous glint to her glowing green eyes. “No way, handsome. With our past history, I’m not letting you out of my sight. Where I go, you go.”

I kiss the top of her nose. “That sounds perfect to me, Fluttercup. I’ll follow you forever.”

She squeezes my hand, her smile bringing a burst of emotions to the surface, and with a saucy grin replies, “Good answer, Nashy.”

This woman, she slays me in the best possible way. Together we step outside and into the magical winter wonderland that so many people have pitched in to make happen in such a short amount of time.

The guests, when they see us emerge, quickly scatter to take their places.

Tiny lights twinkle in the trees as we walk down the aisle flanked by rows of folding chairs, now filled with our family and friends. In lieu of flowers, the arch we'll be standing under is covered with flocked evergreen boughs and pine cones with a few sprigs of red berries scattered around. I have a feeling our moms had a hand in that.

Just as we reach the front, Mac gives a soft gasp and looks up. That's when I see it too. Our gazes meet and we both know. That's the final bit of perfection we needed. As snowflakes swirl down around us, we say the words that will bind us together.

Our past may have been a rocky one, but it took the unexpected path that led us right back to the present where we should have always been. Together. Forever.

Want more Lizabeth Scott books? Click [HERE](#) or visit my website at LizScottBooks.com for a complete reading list of all Liz books.

Don't want to wait? Keep reading for the first chapter of *Silent Surrender*.

But first, don't miss Liz's Behind the Book Stuff. This is where Liz gets real with what went into the making of *Christmas Past, Present, and Forever*.

BEHIND THE BOOK STUFF



Welcome to another edition of Behind the Book Stuff. This is where I get to tell you all the things that went on during my life, and titillating curiosities that occurred behind the scenes of Christmas Past, Present, and Forever. This is the wonderings of my mind and is **unedited** and straight from me. Did you notice I said unedited?

I've always wanted to write a holiday book. This one however wasn't planned. As you may have noticed my book releases for this year have been light. My two surgeries early in 2023 and a possible third before the end of the year is the culprit of that decision. I had no idea if I'd be able to produce more so it was safer to lighten the schedule.

But I'm okay now, and I don't need another surgery. YAY! I felt like it was a perfect time to write the holiday story I've always wanted to write.

First I started brainstorming ideas. My all-time best seller is my rockstar book, Troublemaker. And my second chance books seem to be favorites, so I married the two. A holiday rockstar second chance was the winning trope.

McKenna started as Renee but midway through the second chapter I realized the heroine wasn't a Renee but a McKenna. It was also easier to use a nickname, Mac. Nash, was always going to be Nash. I think Nash Hudson is the perfect rockstar name. Don't you?

McKenna's career was a happy surprise that turned into a very bad habit. Handbags. You know I always research for my

books. A handbag designer wasn't something I had any prior knowledge of. In fact, handbags in general aren't something I had in my wheelhouse. I've probably only had about 10 handbags in my entire life.

As I started my research, I stumbled upon a whole unique close-knit community of handbags. At the time there was one main handbag live on TT. My viewing time started out occasionally and as I grew to know the hosts my time increased. Then after a few months of watching and learning the lingo and the bag styles I ordered my first bag!

Just one. That's all I'll ever order. I have a bag. I don't need more. Famous last words. The ordering started, the delivering happened, and the hosts became more and more interesting to watch. We've bonded. LOL!

This is a whole lot to say, I admit I have a serious problem, and I'm working to stop. Just not very hard. I probably shouldn't mention I have a spreadsheet of orders and their status. Mr. Scott shakes his head as I carry another package in the house.

Anyway, in the story I use some of the hosts names! There's Cathie who is really Katia. She's from Russia and has the most creative personality. I love her enthusiasm for life and the way she sees everyday things. She makes everything fun. Cathie is the one who named the infamous Jessica handbag. One day she was showing a bag that I know I had back in the 70's. It was a leather multicolor patchwork style of bag. She said it reminded her of a Jessica. Then she started naming the same brand of bags. For example, there's Jessica the Actress, Jessica the Artist, Goth Jessica, and Jessica the Business Woman. A bunch more too. Often you will find Cathie dancing wildly to celebrate anything or nothing, or to motivate us into, just getting it. If you want it, just get it. She's uplifting to watch and I enjoy her live.

Violet is Cathie's operator and is behind the scenes. Unless she's dancing with Cathie on screen or voguing handbags. She's also really good at remembering bags the customers are looking for and she's excellent at finding unique and last one bags in the warehouse. I think she's a workaholic because

most days she covers two or three shifts. Not only on the handbag lives, but also on their clothing live too!

Then there's Pennie. She's mild mannered and very sweet. She recently became engaged. We all celebrated for her. She has a genuine caring spirit for her customers and an unending amount of patience. Pennie had this bear water bottle that I loved. She talked the company into getting them to sell because so many of us wanted one. Eventually they came in and were gone before I could get one. The third time they restocked I finally got one! Unfortunately, the water bottle didn't make it into the US and I still don't have one.

Arya is wild and crazy and a bit naughty at times. Most of the time. Her selling technique is raw and funny. She has a fascination with Nestor's balls and her lack of boobs. She's fun to watch and you can easily tell when she's not feeling well or has something going on. She's also the one that I can depend on to say if a bag is a quality one. In fact, my favorite bag was purchased from her at her recommendation. It's a deer clasp bag in white leather.

Evelyn is a fun young woman who I loved watching. She just got a goldendoodle puppy that's adorable. Over a period of months Evelyn's throat issues caused her to no longer be physically able to host and talk for five hours. She's now a behind the scenes operator. I miss seeing her in front of the camera but she can still be heard in the background.

Winnie is the newest host. I always call her Pennie. I've apologized so many times. Sorry! She's still finding her handbag hosting legs but she's so sweet and likable I know she'll become a valued member of the team.

Ceci is the host I'm frightened of. She picks the best bags but I'm scared to ask any questions or make comments. It's best that way. She's from the US and moved to China seven years ago. It's interesting to hear her talk about life in her new home and how it compares to the US. She has a long drive to and from work. Like a two-hour drive one way! She models on the side and is a belly dancer, a teacher, an artist, a nurse, and I can't remember the other careers on her resume.

And last but not least is JJ. I'm not sure of his job title but he helps Cathie dance and vogue the bags and has an incredible voice. He's artist too by decorating rubber duckies as freebies for special customers. I think I may have one of his ducks on the way! He gathers the bags for the host to pack live and does warehouse runs to restock as needed. He's a cutie too!

My fascination with the hosts isn't the only thing I've grown to love. I've also loved seeing what everyone orders and the quantity of some orders I am amazed by. Many customers buy to resell and MVP time is a time of celebration and watching to see what ten 49\$ bags the customer wants and what ten 29\$ bags the host picks for them.

I've also gotten to know some of the regular viewers. Shar, CC, Carol, Maureen, Martha, and so many others have become my live commenting friends. I've learned that the handbag community is a tight one. Often times you will see someone giving up a popular bag they ordered to someone that missed out. I had that happen once. Thank you again, Martha!

I hope you enjoyed reading Christmas Past, Present, and Forever. If you did, I hope you will consider leaving a review to help others discover the book. That would be a wonderful and generous thing to do and would help so much.

Up next, is the next book in the Royal Heirs series, Daring to Surrender. This will be Janel's story. The last of Ki and Mari's children. As always, the book can be read as a standalone.

Be sure to join my mailing list to receive first news of releases, giveaways, and other bookish news.

Until next time...

Keep reading,

Xoxo,

Liz

Keep reading for the first chapter of Silent Surrender!

EXCERPT SILENT SURRENDER



“That will be all, gentlemen. We will pick back up with this discussion next week.” King Kiliad SuMartra dismissed the room of assembled councilmen and sprinted for the door to make his escape. The meeting had already gone long past the length of his patience. He’d only just stepped into the outer office when his assistant handed him a folder and then followed along to update him on his afternoon’s schedule.

“Your Highness, I informed King Rajesh that you were running late. I moved him into the sitting room to await your arrival.”

Ki sighed and rubbed his weary eyes. Nonsense meetings—like the one he just left—were taking a toll on him. Grown men acting like school boys if they don’t get their way, and these were the leaders of their country.

“I suppose Raj is annoyed and irritated at this point.”

Kris, his assistant, gave a crisp nod. “It would appear so, Your Highness. I did provide him with his favorite scotch, which seemed to appease him somewhat. If I may say, he seems a bit...out of sorts.”

Ki had no idea why his friend Raj had requested a meeting with him. Their conversations were usually conducted over the poker table on the third Thursday of the month. He’d known Rajesh since they were in short pants and considered him a close and trusted friend. For Raj to request a private meeting and then travel to Tanistan...the concern was important.

Ki adjusted his tie and tugged on the cuffs of the white dress shirt beneath his navy suit coat. “Thank you, Kris, that will be all. I’ll meet you back in the office.”

The only sound in the long palace hallway was the tapping of his leather shoes on the polished marble tile...until he turned a corner. Ki’s steps paused at the high-pitched giggle coming from the throne room, followed by a deep throaty voice he well recognized. His jaw tensed as he tried to rein in his temper. Even before he opened the door, he knew what, or rather who, he’d find. He pushed the door open to see his son’s naked arse sitting on his throne with an equally naked blonde.

On. His. Throne.

Not even counting to ten, as his wife had taught him to do, did any good in calming his wrath. “Creston SuMartra!” Ki bellowed.

His son had the audacity to pull his lips into a smirk, while the young lady straddling him shrieked and tried to cover her nudity by jumping up and running behind the massive chair. Ki averted his eyes, but not before catching the wickedly cocky glint in his son’s eyes. Cres took his time righting himself by pulling on his slacks, while the young woman floundered.

“Son, you know you always see to a lady’s needs first,” Ki reminded and tipped his head toward the female’s clothes scattered about the floor.

Cres chuckled, “I was trying, Father, before you interrupted.”

Ki wanted to laugh at the imp’s audacity, but instead his brow rose as he pierced his wayward son with a glare. Feeling his father’s ire, Cres bent down and handed the woman her dress and knickers, which she quickly pulled on. Crossing his arms, Ki waited impatiently. Creston was too handsome for his own good and reminded him entirely too much of himself. “On the throne, Creston? Really?”

Cres shrugged without an ounce of remorse. “You know how it is, Father. Ummm, Jennifer...”

“*Melissa*,” the angered woman beside his son corrected with a scowl.

Creston gave the woman an apologetic smile and she literally melted under its power. “Melissa was on the palace tour when I happened to walk by.” Creston’s eyes went to the woman’s chest. “I couldn’t help but notice her luscious...” His eyes flashed upward with a smug grin. “Blonde hair. We got to chatting and I offered to show her the thrones. She thinks they’re ‘awesome.’” He ended with a sly wink to his father.

“Incorrigible,” Ki mumbled, shaking his head because, really, Ki had no one to blame but himself. He wondered if this was how his father felt when he and his brothers were young, impulsive, and thought the world revolved around them. Undoubtedly. Payback is a bitch and his father was probably looking down upon him laughing.

“Get dressed and wait for me in my office.” Ki snapped.

“But we were...” Creston started to argue.

His patience at its end, Ki interrupted and demanded in his most kingly tone, “See the young lady out now, Creston.”

His father’s fury finally registered. With a nod, Creston answered, “Yes. sir.”

Without a backward glance, Ki left his son to clean up his mess and continued on to his meeting with Raj, but his mind was still on his son. His twin sons always surprised him. Even their birth had been a complete and shocking surprise. Mari, his incredibly devious wife, had kept the multiple babies a secret to avoid overstressing him. His little spitfire knew he would have gone overboard trying to keep her safe, meaning she would have been basically confined to their suite and encased in bubble wrap for the duration of her pregnancy. She wasn’t wrong. He would have done exactly that. After almost losing her during the birth of their daughter, Janel, he’d been perfectly content in only having three children. But then along came the twins.

Creston reminded Ki so much of his own brother, Taj. Creston’s twin, Will, wasn’t far behind. His firstborn, Kaden,

had always been the more responsible of his five children. Someday Kaden would make a fine king. His daughters, however, were strong, determined women, much like their mother. Of course, that meant testing him to his limits. Often.

Truth be told, Ki was ready to slow down and he wanted time with his love, his queen, his wife, Mari. He was ready to have more getaways to their secret island and spend endless days bringing her pleasure.

Ki remembered how it was to be a young prince with the weight of the future on his shoulders. When he was around Kaden's age, his father had sent him to the States to represent their country at a very important trade meeting... and his entire life had changed. He'd met Mari. He could still see her coming toward him in the parking lot of the diner where she worked, wearing a ridiculous harem girl costume. At first, he'd thought his parents, who had been pushing for him to marry, had set up his meeting her.

After spending only an afternoon with her, Ki knew she would be his queen. His lips rose in a wide smile. It had taken him a lot of time to convince his little spitfire, but it had been worth it. He wanted that for each of his children. He wanted them to find their own loves. But Creston needed to find his purpose first.

Over an hour later, Ki waved goodbye to his friend as Raj's motorcade left the palace grounds. Once out of sight, he turned to one of the guards. "Where is my wife?"

The uniformed guard snapped to attention and quietly asked whoever was in his ear, then replied, "The family kitchens, Sire."

"Thank you." With a nod of his head, he re-entered the palace. It was a good thing that his wife was in her favorite place because what he had to tell her would probably not please her.

He found her with a pan full of freshly baked cookies in her hands and in the process of transferring them onto a

cooling rack. He leaned against the doorway to observe the woman who held his heart. Her glorious chestnut hair was now peppered with gray, which she refused to have touched up like the women of the court thought she should. There might be a few laugh lines around her eyes, but she was a striking woman at any age. And the love of his life.

“Are you just going to stand there gawking, or do you want a cookie?” Mari asked, her eyes still on her task but a grin pulling at her lips.

“You know I do.” His eyes followed her as she placed some of the cookies on a plate, grabbed a bottle of milk from the refrigerator, and two glasses from the cabinet.

As they both sat down at the replica wooden table from Mari’s childhood home, his perceptive wife said, “Well, come on, you can tell me whatever you need to over a snack.”

Ki chuckled and proceeded to dunk the cookie as Mari had taught him years ago. “You are a very observant wife.”

She shrugged and dunked her own cookie in milk. “I’ve had years of practice. There are only two reasons you seek me out here. One is with news you don’t think I’ll like.” Mari took a bite of the sappy deliciousness and chewed while eyeing him.

“And the other?” he asked.

Their eyes met, her brow rose, and Ki had no problem reading her thoughts or remembering their non-baking use of her kitchen. His eyes went to the stainless steel worktable and he could clearly see Mari naked and covered in chocolate. His reaction was as strong as usual. That would never change. “We do have a way with chocolate frosting if I remember correctly.”

Her smile was filled with promises of future tasty adventures. “You know quite well we do. We have a child to prove it. Now, what must you tell me that you think I won’t approve of?”

He sighed and laid his cookie on the table. “I had a visit from Rajesh.”

Mari's cookie paused as her eyes met his. "How are Raj and Kalish? We haven't seen them in quite some time. Maybe I can invite them over for dinner next weekend."

Ki nodded and continued, "That would be a good thing. I believe Kalish is in need of a friend at the moment. Raj came to me with a very upsetting request. It seems that he's just discovered he fathered a child he knew nothing of."

Mari's cookie dropped to the table and her eyes grew. "What! How can that be?"

Ki was still unsettled by what Rajesh had told him. Had he not found Mari after she'd run from him, he might be exactly where his friend was today. "It was years ago, before he married Kalish. He was visiting the United States and met someone."

Mari sat quietly lost in her own memories of what might have been. She looked up with concern in her beautiful eyes and asked, "But what about the child?"

Ki took his wife's hand and squeezed. "The child is a girl, and upon her mother's death, her solicitor was instructed to deliver a letter to Rajesh notifying him of his daughter. There was some mix-up and the letter was delayed by a few years."

Tears pooled in Mari's eyes. "Oh, that poor girl. Losing a mother is hard. But I'm still confused. Why did Rajesh tell you about this?"

Ki reached over to wipe the tears away. "Because, my love, the girl knows nothing of her parentage or that she is of royal descent. Raj wants Kaden to travel to America and bring her back before the news hits the press. We both know how easily leaks can happen."

Mari nodded in agreement; they'd had their share of press issues. Then her brows pinched together and she tipped her head. "But Kaden is in Africa on a mission trip."

He swiped a finger over his lips, which morphed into a devious grin. "I know, that's why I offered to send Creston."

Her eyes popped open in stunned confusion. "Creston?"

Ki's lips thinned in frustration, remembering his earlier run-in with his youngest. "I caught our son in the throne room a few moments ago entertaining a young woman. On my throne!"

Mari paused in thought. He saw the moment she understood exactly what had been going on. "Do you mean..." she asked and then hid a grin behind her hand.

With another devious grin, he nodded, "Yes, I do. My love, Creston needs a mission of his own. He doesn't see his worth in our family and he takes life entirely too lackadaisically."

Ki saw the sorrow enter his wife's eyes. Their children were scattered in all directions these days. This would be the first time a SuMartra heir wasn't in residence at the palace. She missed their babies, even though they were grown and had lives of their own.

"You're right. Sending Creston could be the motivation he needs. Maybe he'll find a purpose. But what if the girl doesn't want to come? I mean, what is Cres supposed to do if she refuses? Kidnap her?" Mari chuckled, but then sobered when Ki didn't. "No, Ki."

Ki shrugged, "I promised Raj that our son would bring his daughter home by any means possible." Then he handed his wife a copy of the letter Raj had received.

My dearest Rajesh,

I ask for your forgiveness. I have done a very bad thing, but for all the right reasons.

Once you meet your daughter, you will understand why I did what I did. I knew that she would eventually come to you, but I wanted to give her time to grow into the strong woman she is today in order to stand in your world with confidence and overcome whatever obstacles she may face as your daughter.

I can see your handsome face now as you glare at this letter. But you will understand and you will agree that I was right to leave you and keep your child secret. As hard as it will

be to admit, my love, you will know in your heart I was right. And that will be the hardest guilt to come to terms with.

Please know I never doubted that you would love and accept our daughter. A perfect daughter that was created from our love. Elisha needed me and she needed a place to grow into the incredible woman she is today. That is what gave me strength to leave the only man I will ever love in order to protect our daughter.

Raj, I leave this world with peace in my heart knowing you will keep our daughter safe and that you will assure her happiness at all costs, even if it means letting her go.

Be forewarned, she has your stubbornness and I only wish I could see the two of you butt heads, which I am sure will happen often.

Thank you, Raj, for giving me the most precious gift of all, our daughter.

With all my everlasting love,

Alene

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today Bestselling Author Lizabeth Scott spent years doing extensive research in preparation for writing her own stories by reading every romance book she could get her hands on. At least that's how she justifies her HUGE collection of romance books to Mr. Scott.

Liz grew up on a dairy farm in western North Carolina, married her high school sweetheart, and they have 2 children and 2 simply adorable grands.

With her children now settled, Liz pulled her dreams of writing back out and that little spark that sizzled for years caught fire and is now roaring back to life.

Liz loves to read and write stories about quirky, endearing heroines and the strong, handsome heroes who love them to distraction. She promises you a few laughs along the way with some steamy and charming moments thrown in, but always a happy ever after.

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