



Christmas with

DADDY'S

BEST FRIENDS

An Age Gap, Reverse Harem, Secret Baby Romance

LISA CULLEN

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BABY ROMANCE

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Brother's Best Friends for Christmas (Preview)

About the Author

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This book is intended for adult readers only. Any sexual activity portrayed in these pages occurs between consenting adults over the age of 18 who are not related by blood.

DESCRIPTION

When I had a foursome with my father's best friends, the last thing I expected for the holidays was to fall in love... with all three men.

I'm *not* the kind of girl who ends up in bed with three men.
Much less, pregnant with a baby from one of them.

My dad's best friends are totally off-limits, and I don't think I can ever pick between the three gorgeous, older silver foxes.

Cilian has the looks, the charm, and the Irish accent of my dreams. I've always liked him, but I resisted my forbidden crush because I'm afraid Cilian's money comes from a dangerous career.

Luke is a Texan business tycoon who let loose in a way I never expected he would with me that night. But you know what they say about handsome cowboys? That they will *never* settle down.

Zachary is the irresistible older single dad who impresses me with his caring, kind attitude. But I know for a fact just how wild he can get when the curtains are shut.

Now, we're snowed in... with my father, who has no idea one of his best friends has knocked me up.

The real question is, how do I pick just one baby daddy?

Because all of them are determined to win my heart and my new family, and they aren't willing to share... *or are they?*

PROLOGUE

“**Y**ou’ve had your degree for months now, Mia, with nothing to show for it. Maybe I ought to withhold your trust until you take this seriously,” Daddy says, his brow furrowing as he gives me a pointed look.

“I am taking this seriously,” I insist.

It’s not my fault that he insisted I go to college for a “real” degree. I did the work. Mostly. I went to classes. Often enough. But business is boring, and I’m not like my dad. I don’t need the big corporate office and the thousands of underlings scurrying to do my bidding. He’s the big man who found his way in the world of oil, and our family has enough money to last us each ten lifetimes, so I don’t need an income. Why can’t he just accept that I like to bake cookies and party? I don’t need a purpose beyond that.

“You can’t spend your life with no direction. I thought college might help you find one, but you seem just as lost in a fantasy world as you were ten years ago,” Daddy states, his tone gruff.

“Says the man who still throws costume parties for Halloween every year,” I tease, putting on my best innocent face that I know he can’t resist.

Daddy sighs, running his fingers through his graying hair as his expression softens. “I just want what’s best for you, honey. And sometimes, I feel like I’ve deprived you of the opportunity to find your passion because you’ve never had to fight for anything.”

“You worry too much,” I say, rising from my seat in his seventieth-floor New York office and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “You’re the best dad in the world, and there is nothing wrong with providing your daughter with comfort and security.”

“Just promise me you’ll come to the party tonight and speak with some of my colleagues. They might inspire you to make something of yourself.”

“Of course, Daddy. I’ll see you tonight.”

I slip from his massive office with a Central Park view and head down the hall to the elevator bank. I love my father, but his constant nagging is getting old. I suspect he wishes I’d been born a son who wanted to inherit the family business and continue building the Florence empire.

Pity for him, it’s only me.

Well, I might not be the big, bad businessman he would like me to be, but when it comes down to it, my father’s proclivity toward fast cars and even faster women has taught me one thing. Everyone can be brought to my level.

And as a personal challenge, I intend to prove that at the party tonight.

This is going to be fun. And for my little game, I’m going to need the perfect costume.



DRESSED as a flirty nurse and three drinks in, I’m more than ready to start having fun as I scope the crowd gathered in the main room of my father’s penthouse. The music throbs around me, several people dancing to the beat as the DJ synchronizes the colorful light show with his playlist.

The space is filled with the rich and famous who make up my father’s social club. It’s a houseful of millionaires, billionaires, and trust fund babies like me. The perfect opportunity to find a man or two willing to set aside his ambitions and morals for the night to get down and dirty.

Many on the dance floor are here with their significant others, not the right targets for the trouble I intend to cause. But several guests linger in the hallway, chatting with drinks in hand.

I head that direction, sure I'll find better luck with the single men mingling there or in one of the less crowded rooms that host poker and pool.

"Hi, Mia." My dad's secretary and latest conquest flashes me a smile, giving a cute little wave that matches her Playboy bunny costume.

Gag. "Hi, Tina." I don't even bother masking the disdain in my tone.

He's held onto this one for longer than most of the bimbos he's dated since my mom. But I see no point in going out of my way to get along with her—even if it would make my father happy. Not when I'm sure she'll be gone before Christmas.

I glance inside the poker room, sure I'll find a few eligible bachelors there, but quickly change my mind as it becomes apparent that they're too wrapped up in their game to be of much use in mine.

Moving on to the billiards room, I find my odds look much better, and my heart skips a beat as my eyes land on the leather-vested police officer who leans low across the table, green eyes intent on the cue ball. With nothing beneath the leather vest, his muscular arms and shoulders are on full display, making me think of how easily he could carry me somewhere secluded and have his way with me.

The pool balls give a sharp crack, followed by heavy thunks as two solids find their way into two separate pockets, and Cilian O'Connor's lips pull up into a sexy smirk. I find it highly ironic that he's dressed as a cop when I've always suspected the Irish business tycoon of being part of the Mafia.

"Good one," says the pirate with his back to me.

My heels click noisily against the tile floor, announcing my presence over the muffled sound of the music even after I

close the door behind me. Luke Hanson's ocean-blue eyes shift from the pool table, finding mine in an instant.

He stands on the far side of the room with a whiskey sour in one hand, a pool stick in the other. His Southern charm radiates from him as he raises his glass in salute and smiles.

The silver fox might be as old as my father, but he sure knows how to show off a cowboy hat, plaid shirt, jeans, and steel-toed work boots, a toy gun resting in the holster strapped to his hip.

With such broad shoulders and a trim waist, he could easily be mistaken for the real deal. And it hardly seems like a costume when I know he's a born-and-bred Texan whose family has deep roots in the oil industry and over a hundred acres of farmland.

He and Daddy met in college and became good friends and even better business partners.

"Well, if it isn't Florence Nightingale herself," Luke says, his Southern drawl low and playful as he pushes off from the wall to approach.

Cilian's sharp emerald eyes shift from the pool table to find me as well, and he straightens, a look of intrigue flashing across his freckled face.

The pirate turns as well, and I'm shocked to find my father's childhood friend Zachary Paine doing a very convincing impression of Jack Sparrow. It helps that he looks alarmingly like Johnny Depp with a wig of dreaded hair and some eyeliner. "Mia Florence, it can't be. You've grown up," he notes, his tone flattering.

"Zach, I didn't know you were in town."

It's been years since he and my dad were close. Still, he manages to make it to Daddy's Christmas parties often enough, and I know from the stories they've told that they were thick as thieves before Daddy went away to college in Texas.

"My daughter and I just moved here last year," Zach explains.

“Tired of the fresh mountain air?” I tease. It’s what my father says he misses most about Colorado, but I don’t see how anyone could survive outside the city. Nature is wonderful and all, but New York is just so full of life.

“A fresh start,” he says, his smile tinged with sadness.

“More like some distance from that psycho you call an ex-wife,” Luke observes.

Zach casts a sidelong glance his way that would indicate he’d rather not talk about it.

“Yer father said ya graduated college, but he didn’t tell me you took a job in nursing,” Cilian jokes, his Irish brogue making my stomach do funny little flips as his eyes scan up and down my figure appreciatively. “It suits ya.”

I laugh, the flirty banter synonymous with the bad boy womanizer I’ve secretly nursed a crush on since the day we met.

This room is perfect. Three bachelors with impressive reputations and enough ambition to help me prove my point. I would love to have a little fun with any of the three sexy older men here. And from the line of empty beer bottles nearby, I think they’re up for a party as well.

“You fellas mind if I join you?”

“Sure,” they agree in chorus.

“Great. I’m dying for a little stick-and-ball action tonight.” I give a cheeky flutter of my eyelashes as I head to the rack of pool sticks and select one. When I turn around, I’m rewarded with three sets of eyes watching me with fresh intrigue. “How about a game of nine-ball?”

“Sounds fun to me,” Cilian says, reaching into the table’s pockets to start re-racking.

Luke joins him, collecting the diamond-shaped rack from its hanger on the wall.

We do a quick lag to determine our order. Then, as I prepare to break, I bend at the hips, my eyes focused on the cue. The balls connect with a satisfying ruckus, pinging across

the pool table as they spread out. And the red three vanishes off the table with a satisfying *thunk*.

Luke releases a low whistle. “You’ve been practicing.”

“College taught me many valuable skills in life,” I joke. “You boys care to make this interesting?”

“Interesting how?” Zach asks.

“Whoever wins gets a kiss.”

“From you?” Luke asks.

I shrug playfully. “Sure.”

“What happens if you win, then?” Cilian’s green eyes study me closely, his sharp gaze intelligent.

I bite my lip playfully, meeting each of their eyes in turn. “Well, then I get to choose.”

“Sounds like fun to me.” Cilian’s gaze shifts from me to wait for the other two to respond.

Humor dances in Luke’s eyes, like he knows I’m up to some new mischief. But I know he’ll play along. “Alright,” he agrees.

Zach does too a moment later, and I know the flicker of doubt across his face stems from the loyalty he feels toward my father. Though they haven’t been close in years, I know he wouldn’t want to do anything to jeopardize their friendship.

But it’s just a little fun. And as far as I’m concerned, my dad never needs to know *who* of his high and mighty friends is willing to play with me. Only that they’re just as down to party hard as I am.

“Great.” Once again, I bend over the pool table, settling into what I know is a provocative pose as I line the cue ball up with the lowest number. It connects smoothly with the one, and a second later, I’ve pocketed two balls on my first turn. “One more rule?” I suggest. “Just to properly motivate you.”

“I think ye’ve already accomplished that, but go ahead,” Cilian says, his eyes bright.

“Anytime you miss a shot, you have to remove an article of clothing.”

“Mia,” Zach says, his expression conflicted when I turn to look at him.

“What? You don’t have to play if you don’t want to. It’s just a bit of fun.” I twirl a lock of my long blonde hair around a finger in my best display of innocence.

But I can feel the energy in the room shifting, the low hum of anticipation that charges the air. Three gorgeous older men—all hovering right around the age of forty-five and dressed in some of the sexiest costumes known to man—and a twenty-three-year-old with her boobs pushed up to her ears and a nurse’s outfit that barely covers her bubble butt. The situation couldn’t be more perfect.

With an agonized groan, Zach concedes. “Of course I want to play.”

I flash him another smile. “Good.”

Their eyes follow the line of my body down to my hips this time as I bend to line up my next shot.

“Are you going to let any of us play?” Luke teases when my third ball sinks into a side pocket.

“Maybe.” But I’m too cocky, and this time, my intended ball bounces off the felt edge and rolls back toward the center of the pool table.

“Pity,” Cilian says, though his eyes comb curiously down my body to silently assess what I might choose to take off.

With a pointed gaze, I reach up to unpin the nurse’s hat from my head. Cilian’s smile is wicked as he watches me with unabashed enjoyment.

Luke’s up next, and he sinks two more balls before missing his third. “Any requests?” he teases as his fingers grip the top of his cowboy hat to take it off.

I play along. “Definitely the shirt.”

In truth, I've been dying to see what lies beneath that red plaid. And to my delight, Luke actually releases his hat to slowly unbutton it. My mouth goes dry as his chiseled pecs and sculpted abs come into view for the first time. He's always had a strong build beneath his dress shirts and fine suits. But damn. I hadn't expected *that* much muscle.

His bulging arms could almost put Cilian's athletic build to shame, and the Irish hottie looks far from weak in his law enforcement getup. Luke tosses his shirt aside, his lips twitching into a cocky grin when he catches my mouth hanging open. I quickly snap it shut, my skin flushing.

And I quickly turn to watch Cilian play.

Luke left him with a terrible shot, as the cue ball rests squarely behind the nine. But the Irishman seems less than concerned as he aims directly at it. With a sharp jab, Cilian manages to bounce the cue ball over the nine entirely, and to my stunned amazement, it powers into the lowest ball on the table, sending it and a second ball rolling into a pocket one after the other.

Then he aims for a third ball. He sinks that one, too, a moment later.

"Oh, bloody hell!" His hand flies up in the air as the cue ball follows the number six into the pocket. He snatches the cop hat off his head, tossing it aside before his fingers comb into his dirty blond hair.

"It was almost a beautiful shot." I giggle, covering my smile with my fingers.

"Ya shoulda seen me befar I started drinkin'," he jokes.

Zach takes his position at the table, setting himself up for an easy shot with the ball in hand, and he sinks it. Then he lines up for the next shot, with only the nine remaining.

"Oh, sure, we do all the work, and then you just slip in right at the end and steal the glory?" Luke teases.

"That's right," Zach agrees and hits the cue ball.

But he's just slightly off, and the nine bounces off the corner of the pocket without going in.

Leaving a perfect shot for me.

"Thanks, Zach," I tease. "And what item of clothing are you going to give me?"

With a snort, he unbuckles his sword from his hips and kneels to playfully offer it up to me.

"So very noble for a pirate," I praise, accepting it and setting it aside.

Then I lean over the table, and rising onto my toes, I tap the last ball into its pocket for an easy win. A chorus of praise follows, the men each congratulating me, and a bubble of anticipation rises in my chest as they all seem to draw closer instinctually.

"Well deserved. You did do most of the work, after all," Luke jokes.

"So, who's it to be, lass?" Cilian asks. "Who will you be kissing, then?"

Pressing a finger to my lips, I consider each of them. "I choose all of you," I say playfully.

Tension charges the air as the three men exchange glances.

Then Cilian shrugs, breaking the sudden stillness. "Rules are rules," he says with a devilish grin.

My heart skips a beat as he steps forward, closing the distance between us to hook a finger under my chin. Intelligent green eyes peer down at me with untamed excitement, and he leans in slowly. The oxygen vanishes from the room as he prolongs the moment, lingering over my lips until they part with anticipation.

Then he presses a scintillating kiss over my mouth. My eyelids sink closed as his tongue strokes between my teeth in a playful and entirely too provocative way. Heat radiates from my core as my oldest crush blows my mind. Damn, Cilian can kiss, and now I'm hooked.

Strong fingers comb into my hair, awakening a tingling relief across my scalp and down my spine. And then Cilian's lips leave mine. My eyes flutter open as I suddenly realize the hand cradling the back of my head doesn't belong to the playboy Irishman.

Deep-blue eyes peer down at me as Luke gives me a smoldering smile. Wow, he's beautiful. And when his lips find mine, he kisses me with a possessive strength that makes me melt against his bare chest.

I'm breathless when he releases me, his one hand lingering on my hip even as he steps aside to give Zach his turn. My dad's oldest friend studies me with fathomless eyes, their dark depths a well of perceptive emotion.

One hand cups my cheek, and he brushes the pad of his thumb across my lower lips as he peers deep into my soul. Then his full lips press against mine in the most tender caress.

A moan escapes me as fingers brush aside several strands of hair and hot lips close on the sensitive flesh behind my ear. I've never made out with more than one guy at a time, but I'm suddenly craving the experience with an overpowering desire.

Resting my hand over Luke's fingers that still press gently against my hip, I silently tell him I want him to stay. Then I reach up with my free hand to take the pirate hat and wig from Zach's head.

Behind me, I can feel Cilian's body heat as he continues to nibble and suck on my neck. In the back of my mind, I know he could easily be leaving incriminating evidence behind. But I don't care. These three men are gorgeous specimens, and I want to thoroughly enjoy each. A hickey? I know how to hide one.

"You boys ever tried a foursome?" I ask breathily when I finally come up for air.

Luke releases a low chuckle. "I don't recall that being part of the game," he says.

Stomach knotting with excitement, I give a shrug. "You only live once."

“I always knew I liked you,” Cilian murmurs beside my ear.

I widen my eyes at Zach, willing him to say yes because, after having him kiss me like that, I don't want him to stop. Without the pirate wig, I can see his salt-and-pepper curls, and as good as he looks as Jack Sparrow, he's even more handsome with his real haircut.

He doesn't answer me right away. Instead, he takes a step back, and my heart sinks. Not only is he leaving, but he's also doing it without a word. For a brief moment, I start to panic as he heads toward the door. *What if he's going to tell my father?*

Then he pauses, his fingers hovering over the handle before he throws the deadbolt in place.

“Welcome to the party, Zach,” Luke says mildly. “I think the single life is doing you some good.”

Zach snorts. Then he stalks forward, his eyes intense as they openly appraise my body for the first time. He reaches for the nape of his neck and pulls the billowing pirate shirt up over his head and shoulders before tossing it aside.

How are these men all so incredibly fit?

Hot excitement builds between my thighs as I admire his trim, athletic runner's body. He's not as muscular as the other two, but he doesn't need to be. He's long and lean with beautiful muscle tone—the perfect poster boy for tall, dark, and handsome.

Giddy anticipation sends a shiver down my spine, and I reach up to clasp the zipper that rests between my breasts. Slowly, I drag it down, exposing my body inch by inch.

Cilian releases a low groan of appreciation, the deep sound triggering a gush of arousal from my core. I let the skimpy nurse outfit slip down my arms and fall to the floor, revealing my white lace garter belt and thigh-high stockings.

“Damn, Mia,” Luke breathes beside me, and I can see the bulge in his jeans.

His fingers catch mine, and I can feel the rough calluses of working hands against my palm before he lifts it to press a kiss to the inside of my wrist. A gasp parts my lips at the jolt of pleasure that lances through me.

And before I can catch my breath, Zach's lips are on mine once more, his facial hair tickling my chin as his tongue strokes between my teeth. The warmth of Cilian's body presses against my back once more, and the feel of his suddenly bare chest combined with his lips on the curve of my neck raises goosebumps across my skin.

The feel of three pairs of masculine hands on my skin all at once sends my body into overdrive, and my panties are soaked through within seconds. The clasp to my bra releases, Cilian's hands guiding the straps over my shoulders.

Luke's lips leave the crook of my elbow, and a lusty groan issues from my throat as they close around my nipple a moment later.

The three men seem to work in seamless coordination, each finding a new part of my body that needs attention. And when Cilian reaches around to stroke his fingers over the lace of my panties, I shiver with throbbing need.

"I say we strip ya all the way down and see just how perfect ya are under yer pretty lace," he murmurs beside my ear.

I turn my chin, breaking my kiss with Zach to kiss Cilian in silent agreement. His fingers stroke back and forth, urging another moan from my lips, then he pushes the fabric aside to trace the seam of my pussy lips.

A growl of approval issues from his chest. "She's feckin' drippin' for us, boys." Cilian's green eyes are bright with anticipation as they meet mine, then he shifts his gaze to Zach and Luke.

Their responding smiles are positively predatory, making my heart skip a beat. I don't know exactly how I got this lucky, but I can scarcely believe the three most gorgeous men

my father calls friends are currently using their very impressive sexual prowess to please me.

“I want a taste,” Luke rasps, his eyes holding mine as he slowly lowers to a knee.

Cilian’s fingers slide out of me, and the sound of him sucking my juices from them nearly undoes me. Then Luke’s fingers pull the lace of my panties aside, and his tongue strokes between my folds.

“Oh, God!” I gasp, my knees buckling from the force of my arousal.

Zach’s steadying hand grips my elbow to balance me. Then his lips are on mine once more, his free hand roaming up my stomach to fondle my bare breasts. Hands undress me with confident ease, unclasping the hooks of my garter straps before unbuckling the belt.

More fingers slowly roll the stocking down my leg. And when it reaches my foot, I shift my weight, allowing those hands to remove my satin-covered heel and knee-high in one go.

All the while, Luke’s tongue laps at my juices, his thick head of dark-silver hair serving as a secondary source of support. Only after my second stocking and heel are removed do his fingers shift to curl around the waist of my thong to ease it down my hips and past my thighs.

“I want to feel these beautiful lips wrapped around my cock,” Zach murmurs, tracing the pad of his thumb over my lower lip once again. In his eyes burns the same yearning I saw when he first kissed me.

He wants me, and I want him too. More than I had known until tonight, this stranger from my father’s past who lights my soul on fire. I nod, and a slow smile stretches across his full lips.

“Let me have a taste of that fine slit,” Cilian says from behind me.

Luke’s tongue rolls sinfully around my clit, then he releases me to rise from his crouch. And as Cilian’s strong

hands guide my hips to bend at the waist, Zach reaches for the ties of his costume pants.

He undoes them, pulling out his impressive erection a moment later. And behind me, Cilian's hands spread my ass cheeks, his lips taking over where Luke's tongue left off.

I moan lasciviously, gripping my knees for dear life as I soak up the heavenly way he makes my clit throb.

“Open up, angel,” Zach murmurs, his command soft yet definitive, and it makes my pulse race.

I part my lips, following the sexy single father with my eyes as he steps toward me, bringing his cockhead to my mouth. Beside him, Luke gives an appreciative hum, and his abs flex as his hands go to the zipper of his jeans. The bulge beneath them makes my mouth water.

But before I can see what Luke does next, Zach taps my lips lightly with his silken cockhead, silently requesting access. I obey, opening wide to accommodate him. He eases into my mouth, his fingers combing into my hair to keep it out of my face and grip it at the same time.

And it's intensely sexy to see this strong, commanding side of the single dad whom I've only ever watched be a gentle father, someone I admire and respect. But this steamy sexual side of him turns me on like I wouldn't believe.

His cock glides across my tongue to press against the back of my throat, filling me until I gag. Then he eases back out. Slowly, he fucks my mouth, allowing me to get used to his impressive size as Cilian's tongue works magic on my slit, sending tingling pleasure racing up and down my spine.

“You like ass play, Mia?” Luke asks, his rough hands finding the curve of my waist and traveling down to my hips as his words send fresh arousal to coat my dripping folds.

“I'd say she likes it a lot,” Cilian notes, a smile in his voice.

Luke's callused fingers stroke through my folds a moment later, making me groan around Zach's cock as my cowboy gathers slick arousal to spread around my tight, puckered hole.

And when Cilian's lips close on my clit at the same time as Luke eases a single finger inside my ass, I cry out, launching into my first orgasm before I even know it's coming.

"Mmm, I like the sound of that," Luke rasps, his free hand petting my ass cheek and raising goosebumps along my back as my pussy flutters and my clit throbs.

"I want to feel ye come on my cock," Cilian says, rising from his crouch behind me.

The heat of overwhelming excitement washes away my nerves, leaving me boldly ravenous, and my hips roll at the thought of having my long-time crush and Daddy's dangerous business acquaintance filling me up.

I hear his heavy holster belt drop to the floor, and tingling anticipation tightens my nipples as he strokes his silken cockhead between my folds, wetting the tip. All the while, Luke's thick finger slides in and out of my ass, stoking my pleasure into a raging inferno.

Then Cilian presses inside my entrance.

I gasp as his cock stretches me in the best way, filling me up and making my walls tighten with sinful euphoria.

"Damn, Mia. You're so bloody perfect, aren't ya?" Cilian growls, his fingers pressing into the bend of my hips as he starts to rock inside me.

"Seriously, I'm going to come in your mouth if I don't pace myself," Zach says, his voice agonized.

Reluctantly, he eases out from between my lips, and when I look up at him with round eyes, begging him for more, he leans in to kiss me passionately.

"Alright, beautiful, I want a turn," Luke says, his finger sliding out of my ass a moment later.

He comes to stand before me, pulling out his cock and presenting his girthy erection. I smile coyly and look up to meet his blue eyes, then I wrap my lips around his thick tip. Luke groans, his head falling back as his hips rock forward, his cock finding the back of my throat.

And it feels so good to be filled from both ends, claimed by these big, sexy, important businessmen. They could have any girl at this party. Hell, they could probably each have multiple men's wives, but they're all focusing their attention on me and my pleasure, and that fills me with a deep sense of satisfaction that makes my heart thrum against my ribs.

"You think you can take two of us, angel?" Zach asks in his soft, seductive purr as his finger starts to circle my asshole.

My heart skips a beat at the prospect. I've never been fucked by two men at the same time before. I can't imagine I can fit that many cocks inside me when all three are so large, but I want to try.

Gripping the base of Luke's cock, I remove him from my mouth to give a wicked grin over my shoulder. "I think we're about to find out."

"Hell, Mia, when did you turn old enough to say something like that?" Luke groans appreciatively.

I giggle, returning my attention to the towering Texan. "I grew up years ago. You've just been too busy to notice."

"Well, I'm noticing tonight."

My heart does a giddy flip as my dad's gorgeous business partner eye fucks me.

"Let's lay you on the table and show you what a real game of sticks and balls is like," Zach offers as Cilian eases out of my pussy.

Dark laughter fills the room, putting my stomach in knots as strong hands guide me to the table, and Zach gets on first, his salt-and-pepper hair turning almost as silver as Luke's beneath the table's lights.

I hardly have to lift a finger as Cilian and Luke lift me onto the table, and Zach guides me back on top of him so our heads are resting over the far edge of the wood-ledged felt. His hard cock presses between my ass cheeks as he lies beneath me.

Then his long fingers grasp my knees, spreading my legs to put my feet on either side of his thighs.

“Mmm, I like this view,” Luke observes, brazenly admiring my exposed holes.

“Me too,” Cilian purrs, his green eyes alight with anticipation as he walks around the table to stand above my head.

He gives my nipples a light pinch, drawing a sharp hiss of pain-filled pleasure from between my teeth. Then Zach’s cock strokes between my slit and eases inside my pussy.

“Oh, God, yes!” I moan, my eyelids fluttering closed as they grope and fondle me into euphoria.

Zach rocks inside me, his hands supporting my hips so he’s doing most of the work. Meanwhile, Cilian’s fingers tease my nipples, sending jolts of pleasure through my body that make my walls tighten.

“You feel so good,” Zach groans, his teeth grazing the back of my ear. “You ready to have my cock in your ass?”

If he intends to fuck it the way he’s fucking my pussy, then sign me up.

“Yes!” I gasp.

He eases out of me and readjusts. Using my slick arousal as lube, he lines up with my asshole. As he starts to stretch the puckered entrance, Luke’s fingers find my clit. I cry out as the euphoria of Luke’s touch washes away the near painful fullness of Zach’s anal penetration.

I love the overload of stimulation, the way it makes my brain buzz and my spine tingle. As I acclimate to the carnal hunger that rises in my belly, I reach above me to grasp Cilian’s cock. It’s still wet with my arousal, and he groans as I stroke it, loving the way he stiffens against my palm.

The pool table releases a creak of wood as Luke joins us on the table. My heart skips a beat when his lips start to suck and kiss a trail between my breasts. Then he hovers above me, his lips brushing across mine.

“Are you ready for me, beautiful?” he murmurs, his deep voice sinfully soft.

And though I already feel incredibly full, I want more. I nod, lifting my head to nip playfully at his lip. He presses inside me a moment later, his pace synchronizing with Zach's as they fill me to the point of bursting.

I've never felt anything so sinfully exhilarating, the erotic experience of being so thoroughly touched, stimulated, and used. It's mind blowing. And experiencing it with three much older, more experienced men only intensifies my euphoria. Because they're all masters of my body, knowing just how to light me up.

I sob with pleasure, my breasts heaving as I reach climax in a matter of moments. My pussy clamps around Luke's cock, my ass tightening like a vise around Zach, and air hisses between Cilian's teeth as I grip his shaft with the heady force that blasts through me, obliterating my mind.

"Shit, I'm coming," Zach groans, his hips bucking forward as he thrusts deep inside my ass.

Intense satisfaction throbs inside me at the connection it brings, and my clit flutters with fresh excitement at the very primal sensation of him filling me with hot seed. I can feel his heart hammering between my shoulder blades, his firm muscles bunching beneath me, and he lightly bites the nape of my neck as we come together.

On top of me, Luke slows inside my pussy, his expression pained as he fights to hold his load.

"Damn, I love watching ye come," Cilian says, his Irish brogue thickening with his arousal.

A devilish smile stretches across my lips, and I tip my head back to press a kiss to the silken head of his cock.

"Let's turn her over. I'm so close," Luke groans, easing out of my pussy.

Zach does the same, his withdrawal slow and careful. Then his hands support me with impressive strength as Luke guides my legs until I'm straddling the sexy Johnny Depp lookalike lying on the table.

Cilian's fingers comb into my hair, and he guides me down toward his swollen erection. Giddy excitement pools in my belly, and with my ass in the air, I wrap my lips around his slick head.

I can taste the tang of my arousal on his cock, and I love knowing he was inside me. As I start to suck him clean, Zach's teeth close lightly around my nipple, his hand palming my other breast. The sudden warmth seeps through me with a greedy need, and I moan as Cilian's cockhead presses against the back of my throat.

Then Luke's thick tip finds my asshole.

I've never been so well used, so perfectly teased and tortured into oblivion. And though I've already come twice, I'm quickly climbing toward a third orgasm. Sucking in quick breaths as Cilian slowly fucks my mouth, I tremble with the overwhelming pleasure.

Then Zach's thumb finds my clit as two fingers slide inside my pussy.

And that's all it takes to launch me over the edge.

I come hard, my excitement gushing across his palm as he fingers me in perfect time with Luke's deep thrusts. My walls clamp around Zach's fingers, the release pulsing around Luke's cock at the same time.

"Feckin' hell," Cilian groans, his fingers tightening in my hair as his cock swells against my tongue. "I'm gonna come."

His words only intensify the throbbing ecstasy pounding in my clit, and I increase my pace, swallowing his cock with enthusiasm. Cilian grunts, his grip almost painful in my hair for an instant before he blows his load, pouring salty cum down my throat.

And just a beat behind him, Luke finds his own release, his hips jerking erratically as he fills my ass so full it starts to drip out. All four of us take deep, gasping breaths as we slowly come down from our high.

Cilian and Luke ease out of me, and I wipe my lips as I look down into Zach's dark, perceptive eyes. They have a

gentleness to them, a desire to make sure I'm still okay with my decision even after it's over.

And though I fully intend to pretend this night never happened now that I've won my little game, I could almost kiss him for being so sweet. I won't. I think it's best to draw the line at all of us finishing.

But I do reward him with a genuine smile, one that expresses just how much I enjoyed our night together. I clamber off the pool table and quickly stoop to slip on my panties and bra. Then I shrug into my nurse's outfit and zip it.

"Well, boys, this was very fun," I say, my skin flushed with the memory of our time together.

They all slow in their various states of undress, their eyes watching me as I scoop up my stockings, heels, and nurse's hat. Then I blow them a quick kiss, turn the deadbolt, and slip from the room without a backward glance.

That will undoubtedly go down in history as one of the best nights of my life, some of the most intense pleasure I will ever know. But I never intend to bring it up to anyone outside that room.

And if I give it long enough, I'm sure they'll let it go and move on too. I'll make excuses not to come to Daddy's yearly Christmas retreat, and by next year, everyone will have forgotten about my naughty, forbidden night.

MIA

I step out of the taxi and onto the snowy driveway of my father's magnificent Aspen Christmas retreat. The grand mansion stands tall, draped in festive lights and decorations, and covered with an idyllic layer of glistening white. It's always been a place of extravagant holiday gatherings, but this year, my visit holds a secret that could change everything.

My gloved hand rests on the almost imperceptible curve of my belly, a constant reminder of the life growing inside me. I've had some time to wrap my head around the fact that I'm pregnant—a few weeks to truly consider what this means for my future and that of the baby in my belly.

It's the consequence of that wild Halloween foursome, a night filled with passion and an overdose of reckless abandon. Now, my resolve is unwavering—I want to keep this child. It's my responsibility and my choice, no matter what others may say.

The challenge lies in the fact that, since that night, I haven't spoken with the man responsible, not to mention I have no clue which of the three men it is.

And there's another complication—my father. He'll be furious to find out that I had slept with one of his friends. But more than that, I can only imagine what he'll have to say about how I've ruined my future now. Getting pregnant when I'm not even in a relationship? In his generation, that's like admitting to being a prostitute.

Needless to say, it's not a conversation I'm eager to have.

But I've devised a plan. Here, at my father's Christmas retreat, surrounded by holiday cheer and goodwill, I'll approach one of the three men I spent Halloween with and convince him that he's the father of my child, that it's his duty to commit to me and support our baby. At least then, when I tell Daddy, he'll be more likely to accept my choice.

As I make my way to the front door, I consider my options. Zachary, the single father, would be the most logical choice. He's kind, responsible, and has already proven himself as a good father. Starting with him seems like the safest bet. Though I know him least well, I know the stories of him and my father growing up. He's the conscience of the group, the one who will meet my conundrum with a sense of compassion. It doesn't hurt that he looks like Johnny Depp from *21 Jump Street* with his swept-back curls and dark, perceptive eyes.

Then there's Luke, my dad's business partner and a very successful businessman. He can offer financial security and dependability. He doesn't have Zach's crazy ex-wife to take into consideration, and after forty-odd years as a workaholic bachelor, he's done nothing but rake in money and grow his empire. He's the best candidate to help me sustain my lifestyle of choice. Not to mention he has Southern charm for days and a body built from a lifetime of healthy habits and hard work. He's not afraid to get his hands dirty, and his powerful physique showcases that perfectly.

Last but certainly not least is Cilian, the man I've had a crush on for most of my life. He's the wild card, the one I doubt would settle down even if I claimed the baby was his. But that Irish accent is to die for, not to mention those green eyes that remind me of just how intelligent he is. He's the complete package—the looks, the wealth, the charm. If I were confident I could rely on him, I would pick him in a second. But Cilian is known for his playboy ways. I can't imagine him wanting to settle down to be the father of my child.

As I reach the towering front door, my phone dings, alerting me to an incoming message. And when I pull my

phone from my lined cream-and-caramel-plaid pea coat, I find I've received a text from my dad.

The weather in New York has grounded all flights. Even my pilot insists it's too bad for my plane to take off. I'll be delayed by a few days. Preparations are in place. The staff knows the schedule and which meals to have prepared when. But I will need you to host in my stead until I can arrive. I have complete confidence in your abilities in that regard. See you soon, my dear.

I sigh, knowing that my time to put my plan into action has just been impinged upon considerably. It's a lot easier to scheme when no one's supposed to be watching me. This will mean more days of uncertainty and anxiety, but I can't back out now. I have to lock down a father for my child, and I've set Christmas day as my deadline to tell Daddy.

Won't that be an unexpected gift?

But I know that telling him on Christmas is my best chance of softening the blow. My dad has always been about the holiday spirit—of the joy it inspires and the magic of bringing families together. So an unexpected grandchild might seem like less of a bomb and more of a present on the festive occasion. At least that's what I hope.

As I step into the house, warmth and comfort envelop me. The scents of pine and freshly baked gingerbread fill the air. Every room is lavishly decorated with ivy and garland and twinkling lights that make it impossible to forget the time of year. A real Christmas tree occupies one corner of each room, all the perfect size for their designated location and decorated with a special theme that suits the space.

Guests will start to arrive soon, and the staff has preparations for the welcome party in full swing, giving the house a bustling atmosphere. Behind me, the door opens as the butler brings in my bags. As I head to the living room to see if anyone arrived early, he carries my luggage to my designated room.

My heart skips a beat as my eyes land on one lone figure, his broad shoulders filling the tall window he stands before,

the light silhouetting his impressive frame. He turns when I enter the room, my heels announcing my presence before I do.

Luke unleashes a dashing smile as his sea-blue eyes twinkle. “Mia, I was hoping I might have the opportunity to see you before others arrive.”

The words shouldn’t send a thrill through my body the way they do, but knowing he came early in the hopes of speaking with me fills me with an intense sense of relief. It means he’s been thinking about me since Halloween, despite my leaving with no explanation or attempt at closure.

My behavior that night feels so rash now, so reckless and carefree compared to the life-changing choices that have stemmed from it. I can only imagine what Luke will think.

“It’s wonderful to see you,” I say, striding across the expanse of the living room to greet him properly.

He pulls me into a hug—something he’s never done before—and the masculine scents of leather and motor oil fill my nose, making my stomach tremble. *How have I known Luke for so many years and only just noticed how gorgeous he is, how manly and strong? Are my hormones starting to take control of my brain? Or has he always been this attractive?*

“Let me take your coat,” he offers as he releases me.

“Oh, thank you.” I shrug out of it, but as he drapes it over his arm, the etiquette seems all backward.

“Wait, I’m supposed to be the one hosting. Not you,” I tease, taking the jacket from him.

“Not your father?” Luke’s dark eyebrows, the last remaining hint of his once-black hair, quirk into a playfully questioning look.

“Apparently, he’s grounded in New York until the storm passes, so you’re stuck with me.”

“An unexpected holiday treat. I must be on Santa’s nice list this year.”

Heat radiates from my cheeks at the unexpected compliment, and I suddenly find it challenging to meet his

eye. Whatever I had anticipated as my first conversation with Luke, this was not it.

“Join me while I hang it in the coat closet?” I suggest, lifting my jacket.

“Of course.” Luke gestures for me to lead the way, and when his hand finds the small of my back, butterflies erupt in my belly. “How have you been?” he asks, his Southern drawl low and smooth.

Anxiety quivers in my gut, and though this could be the perfect opportunity to broach the topic of my... condition, I find it nearly impossible to get the information past my lips.

“Good, good. Fine. You?” I say instead, my voice unusually high.

“Fine. Though Halloween has been weighing on my mind. I—”

The door swings open, letting in a burst of arctic air as two bundled-up guests stride in on a breeze.

“Bill, Sarah. Welcome!” I say, stuffing my jacket into the coat closet on its hastily found hanger.

I send a quick apologetic glance Luke’s way to let him know I’m not avoiding the conversation, and he flashes me a knowing look. Then he joins me in greeting the Colorado natives who made the drive in from Denver.

The influx of arrivals within the next ten minutes wipes away any chance for Luke to address whatever he wanted to say, though he murmurs a quick, “I’ll find you later,” before he leaves me to my role as hostess while he mingles with the other guests.

“Mia!” Zach says as I greet him and the beautiful young tween who steps into the entryway with him. “You remember my daughter, Lindsey, right? Lindsey, this is Mr. Florence’s daughter, Mia.”

“I know, Dad.” The girl rolls her eyes, reminding Mia of her own rebellious years of pointed disinterest in whatever her father had to say.

“You’ve grown so tall,” I observe, noting that she’s nearly the same height as I am now. Her dark waves and onyx eyes are strikingly similar to her father’s, and at the back of my mind, I wonder if my baby won’t have those same traits.

Or maybe they’ll be blond, like Cilian and me. Or what if my baby has Luke’s remarkable sapphire eyes, just a few shades darker than my own? I can only wonder. But the one thing I can guarantee is that my baby will be beautiful.

“I’m taller than nearly half the boys at my school now,” Lindsey says, the glint in her eyes conspiratorial.

I laugh. “Enjoy it while you can,” I joke. “They won’t stay short forever.”

Then I shift my attention to Zach. His eyes are already on me, studying me with silent speculation that makes me feel like he can pluck my secret right from my mind.

“I think Daddy put you two in the purple suite,” I say to distract myself from the tremble in my stomach. “Do you need me to show you the way?”

“Oh, no. I think we’re good. We’ve stayed in that room before. Right, kiddo?”

Lindsey gives a one-shoulder shrug and pulls out her phone.

“I’m just glad he was able to adjust our accommodations at the last minute,” Zach says, his shoulders relaxing slightly.

“He did?”

“Yeah, Mom decided two days ago that she would rather spend Christmas in Paris with her new boyfriend, so no Hawaii for me this year,” Lindsey says drily, her eyes fixed on her device, the hurt well-hidden beneath a layer of teenage snark.

My heart aches for her, as I know that same pain of an absent parent and the sense of abandonment that comes with it—no matter how present the other parent might be. Slung an arm around her shoulders, I give her a quick squeeze.

“Well, you’ll have way more fun here, anyway,” I assure her. “Because Aspen has one thing that Hawaii never will.”

“What’s that?”

“A white Christmas.”

That gets a giggle from the lanky young teen, and Zach meets my eye with an appreciative smile. I return it, happy to know I’m bringing a bit of cheer to a girl who would probably much rather be anywhere but stuck at her dad’s holiday party and surrounded by adults for days on end.

“Well, I’ll leave you to get settled in. Let me know if you need anything,” I say, gesturing toward the hallway that leads to the purple suite.

“Thanks, Mia,” Zach says, and he gives my fingers a gentle squeeze that makes my heart skip a beat.

As they head down the hallway with their luggage, I head back out to the expansive living room to mingle with the guests gathered there. The golden-lit tree in the corner stretches up to the vaulted ceiling in a spectacular display, the decorative presents beneath wrapped in shiny packaging with glittery bows.

Standing next to the roaring fireplace is the one person my eyes naturally seek in the familiar group of my father’s friends. Cilian holds a tumbler of whiskey in one hand, observing the room silently, mischief glinting in the depths of his green eyes. And when he spots me, he raises his glass in a casually sexy salute.

Why is he so irresistibly attractive?

I can feel the magnetic energy surrounding him, effortlessly drawing every available—and many taken—woman’s gaze his way.

And yet, his eyes linger on mine, showing me a singular interest that wasn’t there before. He doesn’t have to say it for me to know. Halloween did not satiate the curiosity that’s been building between us for years. It awoke a hunger I’m not sure I’ll be able to control.

And it seems it awakened a desire in him as well.

This isn't at all what I had expected. I had anticipated Luke, Zach, and Cilian might try to avoid me. I thought they would be more than ready to forget about the whole Halloween affair, pretend it never happened—like I had when I'd walked out the door that night. But they clearly each expect something of me at this retreat.

All three of the men I'd set out to speak with tonight seem willing to chat. More than that, I get the sense that they want to further explore the chemistry I set in motion that night. At least to discuss it, if nothing else.

My cheeks flush as Luke's gaze finds me as well, and I grow intensely aware of both sets of eyes watching me closely. Their gazes follow me with that same predatory interest as they did two months ago, filling my belly with warmth.

I'd been prepared to have to plead my case and convince one of these men to claim the baby growing inside me. I hadn't anticipated I might have three men looking to me for something more. An interest that goes beyond a steamy one-night stand.

And with the added responsibility of hosting all my father's friends, I sense my control of the situation quickly slipping through my fingers.

I've really created a mess this time.

ZACHARY

I stand in the lavishly decorated family suite of the luxurious Aspen mansion, my heart heavy with the knowledge that my daughter, Lindsey, had been looking forward to spending Christmas with her mother for months now.

It was supposed to be their special time together, just mom-and-daughter time. A break from the transition from a small town to big-city life and the lack of familiarity she's had far too much of this year.

But as usual, my ex-wife flaked at the last minute, leaving Lindsey crestfallen. And though my sharp-tongued rebel won't say as much, I know she's hurt that Hannah would rather spend time with her new boyfriend than enjoy the holiday with our daughter.

I glance over at my thirteen-year-old spitfire who stands beside me with a forced smile.

"Hey," I say, reaching out to give her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sorry your Christmas plans fell through, but I'm sure Mom will make it up to you."

"Yeah. Right. Not like I really wanted to spend a week lying on the beach, soaking up the sun, learning how to surf, or anything lame like that, anyway." Her tone drips bitterness, as does her signature eye roll.

"I know this isn't exactly the holiday you hoped for, but I promise we'll make the best of it."

“Yeah, I can just picture it now. Water aerobics at seven a.m., bingo at three thirty, a soft dinner that can be eaten with dentures, lights out by six? This will be *great*.”

“Hey, this place might be full of boring old men, but we can still have some fun. And what matters most is that we’re together for Christmas.”

“Yeah, okay, Dad,” she agrees, her voice bordering on sarcastic.

Usually, I might insist she find a better attitude, but I know this weekend is hitting her hard. “Shall I leave you to finish on your own?” I offer, sensing that she needs some time.

“I think I can manage, seeing as I’m not four anymore.”

“Lindsey.” The hint of warning in my strict-dad tone gets the point across.

“Sorry,” she concedes.

“I know, hun,” I say more gently. “I’ll be in the other room if you need me, okay?”

Lindsey nods, turning her attention back to her suitcase she’s about halfway done unpacking. The sigh that follows communicates so much more truth than her words.

I hate that I can’t protect her from her mother’s constant letdowns. I hate that she has to carry the burden of these disappointments, even if I’m here, trying to pick up the pieces.

Leaving Lindsey to her thoughts, I head out to the communal area and grab my bag, slinging it over my shoulder.

I can’t help but think about Mia as I do so. Even in the chaos of the day, her image remains vivid, her striking sky-blue eyes and broad, winning smile etched into my memory. She’s always been a force to reckon with, her vibrant energy that rips through a room like a hurricane—a sharp contrast to my quiet, routine life.

Then Halloween fills my mind. That night, something shifted between us, a boundary crossed that I never should have breached. As the daughter of my childhood best friend, she should be completely off limits, and messing around with

her, even if she started it, feels like sacrilege. Yet, the memory of her lips on mine lingers, her closeness a temptation I can't fully shake.

A knock at the door startles me, and I open it to find Mia standing there, a hesitant smile playing on her lips. "Hey, Zach, just wanted to make sure you and Lindsey are settling in okay," she says, her voice friendly as her eyes search the room behind me for my daughter.

"Oh. Yes, great. Thank you." I return her smile, my pulse quickening as I realize this might be the perfect opportunity to broach the topic that's been on my mind since I saw her last. "Would you like to come in?"

"Sure," she agrees, though the relief on her face makes me wonder if she'd been hoping to talk.

She steps inside the door, and the sudden proximity brings a rush of warmth to my cheeks. I gesture for her to lead the way into my designated bedroom. Then I close the door behind us for some privacy because I don't want Lindsey to hear the conversation I know we need to have.

We sit on the edge of the bed, the air heavy with unspoken tension, and I find myself blurting, "How have you been since Halloween?"

Mia's eyes widen, her composure faltering for a moment. "I've been... I've been okay," she stammers, her gaze flicking away. And that tells me without a doubt that she's been thinking back on that night with trepidation.

"I want to apologize," I start, my voice tight as I broach the topic so she won't have to. "Things got out of hand that night. I never should have let it get that far—"

Before I can finish, Mia interrupts, her words spilling out in a rush. "Zach, I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant, and I don't know what to do. Daddy will be furious when I tell him, and I'm kind of freaking out. I didn't know who to turn to, so you're the first person I've told. I mean, I know I want to keep it, but I don't have my life even a little bit together, and to tell my dad when I have no answers..."

As her words taper off, her confession hangs between us, a shocking revelation that sends my mind reeling. I grasp for words, my heart thudding in my chest. “You’re... you’re sure? I mean—of course you are. Sorry. That’s just... wow.” I comb my fingers into my hair, trying to ground myself in reality. “Do you know... who the father is?” I manage to ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Silence lingers in the air, replacing the oxygen that had been there just moments before.

Mia shakes her head, her eyes anxious. “I don’t,” she whispers back, her vulnerability tearing at my insides. “But I’m confident it’s from that night, that it... belongs to one of you three.”

I take a deep breath, my mind racing as I try to process the weight of her words. “I’ll take responsibility,” I say firmly, my voice unwavering. “I know how your dad can be. You don’t have to worry. I’ll stand by you, Mia.”

She can’t possibly rely on Cilian to support her, and Luke won’t be able to prioritize Mia and a child when his relationships have always come in second to his work. I might not have a shining track record when it comes to successful marriages, but I know my priorities in life. My child will always be at the top of my list. It doesn’t matter if this child is biologically mine or not. It’s luck of the draw who got Mia pregnant that night, and I won’t let her feel scared and alone, bearing this burden on her own, not if I can help it.

A palpable relief washes over Mia, her shoulders sagging with the weight she’s been carrying for too long. I know Mike Florence loves his daughter. After having known him for most of our lives, I can see it in the way he spoils her with gifts.

But he’s not one for showing affection. If anything, he tends to be harder on the people he loves, holding them to his impossible standards to ensure they *make the most out of life*, a motto he’s lived by since we were children. He won’t take it well that his daughter is pregnant fresh out of college.

If I stand by her side, he at least won’t be able to claim she’s completely irresponsible. After all, he knows Mia and

the child will never want for anything.

“Thank you, Zach,” she murmurs, her big blue eyes wide and trusting. She’s always been beautiful, but seeing her so open, so vulnerable now, after having spent such an intimate night together, it somehow makes her all the more breathtaking.

She’s not the cheeky, overly confident young spitfire. She’s raw and emotional and surprisingly composed for having to manage such a life-changing event. She licks her lips nervously, wetting them, and my gaze flicks down to her full mouth.

In a flash, the air charges with an electric tension, a connection that makes my pulse quicken. Then Mia leans in, and before I can process what’s happening, her lips meet mine in a soft kiss.

I can taste the mixture of emotions there—relief, gratitude, and a hint of longing. My heart races, and I find myself responding, pulling her closer as our kiss deepens.

The moment heats with unspoken desire and the unearthing of emotions that have been simmering beneath the surface. She pulls away too soon to peer up at me through thick lashes, her golden-blond hair forming a curtain over one eye.

And because I’m feeling daring, I reach up and comb it behind her ear.

“I should probably get back to the guests,” she murmurs breathlessly.

“Yeah. Sure. Of course,” I agree, rising with her.

I walk her back to the door, and before she opens it, she turns to me with a gentle smile.

“Thank you, Zach. I can’t tell you how much it means to know we’re not alone in this after all.” She rests her hand on her stomach as she says it, the “we” apparent in the gesture.

It warms my heart to think I’m going to be a father again. After Lindsey’s mom and I started having issues, I’d given up

hope of giving Lindsey a sibling. And while this might not be the conventional way to go about it, I've always wanted a big family.

"Not for a second," I assure her. "We'll figure it out together."

She leans up onto her toes to press her lips softly to mine once more. Then she turns to head back down the hall.

I watch her leave, the taste of her kiss lingering on my lips. The weight of the world feels heavier now, but alongside it, there's a glimmer of hope, a flicker of possibility that we might find a way through this together.

MIA

I scarcely dare to breathe as I head back to my room, worried that if I do, I might wake from my dream. Things went far better with Zach than I had ever imagined they could. He stepped up to the plate right away, taking responsibility without pressuring me to answer the question of paternity. Maybe I have nothing to worry about.

As I step into my room and close the door, leaning back on it, I finally release the breath I've been holding. I feel as light as a feather. Daddy won't be happy when I tell him I'm pregnant, but he'll be far less disappointed to see Zach by my side. The single dad is kind, responsible, successful, someone my father trusts with important things. So, telling him we're having a child together will be far less terrifying than doing it on my own.

Now, I just have to entertain Daddy's guests until he arrives. Pushing off from the door, I collect myself and head to the bedroom to get changed. Cocktail hour is always a lavish affair with evening gowns and fine suits—a perfect opportunity for the women to don their jewels and the men to show off their new trophy wives or mistresses.

Stripping out of my tan cable-knit sweater dress, I toss it onto the bed and open my walk-in closet of designer apparel. I kick my heels toward the shoe rack and run my hands over several options, relishing the plush carpet beneath my feet as I go.

A few seconds later, a soft knock sounds at my door. Probably one of the staff here to give me an update on the dinner menu or event timing. Daddy is nothing if not prepared in every aspect of his life—unlike me—and probably already called the butler to inform him that I’m hosting in his stead.

“Coming!” I call, snatching the rose-colored silk robe off its hanger and quickly shrugging into it. Then I pad to the door, feeling short after my day of travel in Jimmy Choos. I tie the robe around my waist as I reach the door.

Then I grab the handle and swing it open, donning a cordial smile.

My stomach drops as my eyes meet a set of emerald eyes set in a lightly freckled complexion. Cilian’s dirty-blond hair is styled into careless perfection, the shorter locks seemingly haphazardly combed away from his face. But the crisp line of his fade tells me his haircut is freshly maintained.

“Mia, I hope I’m not interrupting anythin’?” He flashes a dangerous smile, sending butterflies into my chest as his eyes scan down the length of my body.

“No, it’s fine. I was just picking out my dress for tonight.”

Is it just me, or is my room getting hotter? It might be that Cilian’s leaning closer, the smells of fresh rain and pine surrounding him in a subtly sexy scent. And though I just left Zach’s room, I find myself desperately wanting the playful Irishman to kiss me.

“I can help with that,” he assures me, his eyes twinkling.

For a split second, I think he’s talking about the kissing part. Then he steps around me, entering my room and heading toward the open closet.

He was offering to help me pick out a dress.

Flustered, I shut the door and follow him back into my room, my stomach a trembling knot of anxiety. “You really don’t have to help,” I insist, entering the closet with him as he scans the rows of hangers like a man on a mission.

“What, are ye worried I don’t have good taste, lass?” he teases, his lips curled into a wickedly handsome smile as he glances my way.

“No, I didn’t—I wasn’t... saying that,” I fumble, my voice tapering off as my mind goes blank. *Why do I always get so tongue-tied around Cilian?*

Cilian chuckles, low and soft. “I’m only razzin’ ya. Here.”

He grabs a navy-blue velvet bodycon dress with long sleeves, a modest neckline, and a back that plunges all the way to the waist. Sophisticated and sexy—not to mention a perfect accent for my eyes.

Then, as if an afterthought, he bends to scoop up a pair of metallic champagne-colored, open-toed heels with glittering gems adorning the closed backs. Thin ankle straps complete the look.

Okay, he seriously has good taste.

“There, now yer all set,” he observes, setting out my selected outfit before turning the full force of his attention on me. My heart skips a beat as I’m suddenly captured by a pair of emerald eyes.

“Thanks,” I say, stunned and slightly flustered by his sudden proximity.

“Now, I was hopin’ I might steal a moment of yer time.” Cilian’s voice is low, his lilt soft as he steps close, and I’m suddenly intensely aware of how tall he is. “If ye don’t mind.”

The warmth of his body radiates through my thin robe, making my pulse quicken. “No, that’s fine.” Dear God, I sound like I just sprinted a mile. I have *got* to pull myself together. Clearing my throat, I try to collect myself. “How can I help?”

“Ya see, usually, when I spend the night with a beautiful woman, that’s all it is. But I can’t seem to stop thinking about ye. Not since Halloween. I’m not used to getting stuck on a girl, but I’ve been goin’ positively crazy these last few months, wondering where you were, if I might not run into

you at one of your father's events. I nearly asked him for your number half a dozen times..."

Nervous excitement pools in my belly. And though I'm intensely grateful that he didn't ask for my number, it sends a silent thrill through me to know I've been on his mind.

Because I can't get past that night either.

For more reasons than I can count.

Cilian shakes his head, his finger hooking under my chin to tip my lips higher, making my heart tremble and goose bumps rise across my skin. The magnetic attraction between us pulls me closer, stealing the oxygen from the room as my lips tingle with anticipation.

Zach's face flickers unexpectedly in my mind's eye, bringing with it a wave of guilt as I think about the great conversation we just had—his complete lack of hesitation when he found out about my predicament.

The electric kiss we shared.

I don't know how he might feel about where that puts us concerning a relationship or commitment. He didn't even ask what I intended to do about Luke or Cilian.

But as the temperature increases between me and the man I've had a crush on for years, I don't know that I can restrain myself. Cilian awakens in me a ravenous hunger that I can't ignore.

"Well, I'm here. Now," I breathe, my heart fluttering as his eyes flick between my eyes and my lips.

"Then put me out of my misery and say yes," he murmurs, leaning forward until our lips are mere inches apart.

"To what?"

"Us. Me and you. I want to take my time and learn just how to make you tremble."

Oh, God. He already has. I can't stop the way my stomach quakes when he speaks, the sinful excitement that pools in my

belly when he levels me with his gaze. I can't find the words to answer as my lips part. But my eyes say yes.

And slowly, with agonizing patience, he inches closer, his eyes zeroing in on my mouth. His lips meet mine, gently, brushing against them like silk, and his tongue dances between my teeth. Liquid fire races through my veins, and my mind wipes clean of any logical thought as overwhelming desire consumes me.

I melt against him, my knees going weak as he kisses me with the expertise of a man who's spent his life in bed with women. His pace is tantalizing, his pressure shifting between ravenous and tender, keeping me on my toes as he leaves me consumed by his presence.

His strong arms snake around my waist, enveloping me as he pulls me close. And I'm intensely grateful as he stabilizes me, ensuring I won't fall when my wobbly knees give out completely.

"These lips," he murmurs, breaking our kiss to cup my cheek as he runs the pad of his thumb over my bottom one. "I keep dreaming about how gorgeous they looked wrapped around my cock."

My core tightens at the lascivious comment that awakens tantalizing images of that night. Then his fingers lightly brush down my throat, tracing the line of my collarbone before finding the neckline of my robe.

My breath quickens as he slowly travels down it, tracing the sensitive skin of my chest. His soft touch finds the inner curve of my breast, making my nipples harden inside my lace bra. Then he hooks a finger around my hastily tied satin belt. He undoes it, allowing the panels of my robe to fall open, even as his lips consume mine with greedy desire.

Then his warm palm cups my breast, kneading the supple flesh.

"Ye have the most perfect body," he rasps, his voice growing strained with desire.

But Cilian's is far more intoxicating than mine. I can't seem to keep my hands off him as one arm wraps around his broad shoulders, my other hand running down the length of his hard chest.

His hand continues to travel over my body, sliding beneath the fabric of my robe to follow the line of my waist. Then he grabs a handful of my ass. His agonized groan blasts through me like a bomb, my thong soaking with my excitement in an instant as I crave him with shocking intensity.

And as if he can hear my need, he starts to undress me, his hands swiftly pushing my robe down over my shoulders to let it pool at my feet. My reaction is instant, my fingers quickly working to undo the buttons of his dress shirt.

I shove it open as Cilian backs me toward the bed, our lips kissing, consuming with unbridled need. He unhooks my bra as my hands go to his belt. Then, in a flash, his fingers are pressing into my hips as he hoists me off the ground to toss me bodily onto the bed.

Squealing as the bed bounces beneath my sudden weight, I reestablish my equilibrium just in time to see Cilian step out of his pants and shoes. Then he falls onto the bed with me. Strong fingers grip my chin as he turns my head with authoritative pressure.

Then his teeth close around the lobe of my ear. I gasp at the jolt of excitement that lances through me from the subtle pain and overwhelming pleasure. My breasts press up against his iron chest as I gasp, my muscles tightening.

His impressive erection stiffens against my hip, telling me just what he wants to do to me, and I throb with the need to feel him inside me once again. As much as I thought I could have a one-night stand with Cilian—to have some fun and prove that the men my dad considers so high and mighty can be just as reckless and spontaneous as I am—I know now that once would never be enough.

This passion, the fiery desire that consumes me now, fills me with a sinful enthusiasm that makes me feel alive. Cilian's lips burn a scintillating trail down my body as his fingers hook

around the waistband of my thong. Then he strips me of my panties, dragging them hungrily down my legs.

He tosses them aside, his shoulders dipping between my knees a moment later so his lips can close around my clit. I cry out at the jolt of pleasure that makes my hips rock. And when his fingers find my hips, digging into my flesh to pin me to the bed, the heat of my excitement lights my soul on fire.

I love how commanding he is, and yet so focused on my needs—like he’s demanding my pleasure and won’t release me until he’s extracted every last drop.

Humming appreciatively, Cilian strokes his tongue between my folds, gathering my juices on his tongue. Ripples of euphoria wash through me, and I can hardly believe I’ve fallen into bed with the sexiest Irishman I’ve ever met. A man shrouded in danger and mystery, my father’s most forbidden friend.

But the way he makes my pulse quicken, the thrill of knowing that I’m what’s driving him mad, it wipes every rational thought from my mind.

All I want is Cilian.

He sucks on the sensitive bundle of nerves throbbing at the peak of my thighs. My pussy twitches, my excitement building as I climb toward heavenly release. Combing my fingers into his hair, I curl them into his thick blond locks and give a gentle tug.

Cilian groans in response, nipping my clit a moment later and releasing a burst of euphoria that numbs my fingers and toes. Then two fingers slide inside my entrance, curling to stroke my G-spot with practiced precision.

“Oh, God!” I gasp, my thighs quivering as my hips roll involuntarily.

Cilian purrs against my slit, fingering me more adamantly as he drives me to the point of oblivion. And before I can see it coming, I’m toppling over the edge. Breasts heaving, I arch as my muscles tighten with the intensity of my release.

Warmth gushes from my core. Pulsing relief pounds through me, my clit twitching and walls clamping around his fingers. And though I know that this is exactly how I got myself into trouble to begin with, all I can think of is how I want more.

Cilian's gaze lifts to meet mine as his lips release me with a soft *Pop*, and I groan as my clit twitches with a final aftershock.

"Yer pussy's as sweet as a Christmas cookie," he murmurs, his broad shoulders shifting as he slowly slinks up my body, his gaze playfully wicked. "But ye know what I've been dreamin' about since Halloween?"

"What?" I breathe, my heart pounding as I follow his catlike movement.

"Fillin' that sweet ass."

I shiver at the dark promise in his words, my heart fluttering as I think about his massive girth stretching my tight hole. It fills me with a heady combination of anticipation and anxiety. Because Cilian is not small. But I desperately want to know what he feels like.

He sits up, shoving his boxers down and joining me in naked bliss.

Then he shifts between my knees once more, his hips spreading my thighs. The intimacy of being with Cilian alone is somehow just as exhilarating as sleeping with three men at the same time. Having all his attention focused on my pleasure sends tingling excitement up my spine.

Like a cup of hot cocoa on Christmas morning when I'm still wrapped up in flannel pajamas, it fills me with a deeply gratifying warmth.

Lining up with my entrance, he presses inside me, filling me with an intense satisfaction that consumes my soul. His lips claim mine at the same time, parting them so his tongue can stroke between my teeth. The bitter tang of my juices mingles with the whiskey on his breath, making my stomach quiver.

And as he penetrates me deeply, I groan with agonized pleasure.

CILIAN

The connection between me and Mia is electric, the heat off the charts as her legs wrap around my hips, her heels pressing into my ass. She's feisty, young, and full of adventure, up for anything I throw at her.

And she's sinfully sexy.

I don't care if this merits a year on Santa's naughty list. For Mia, I would take a stocking full of coal. As I press inside her glorious pussy, a deep, passionate lust to satisfy her fills my chest.

I've been tempted by her since the night of her twenty-first birthday, when Mike and I had to go collect her from a club at three o'clock in the morning—after they'd stopped the music and turned on the lights—because she refused to leave.

Her desire to celebrate, to live life to its fullest, to wring every drop of pleasure for each moment is inspiring, alluring. If anyone in the world could match my thirst for life, it might be Mia.

But until Halloween, I hadn't dared tempt myself by thinking I might actually claim her.

She's the daughter of both my business partner and friend, and she's nearly half my age. But she doesn't seem to mind—she certainly didn't the night she boldly stripped her nurse's outfit for me and two other men. Still, she's forbidden fruit I never should have tasted.

Perhaps that is part of her appeal, wanting her because I know she could never be mine. But for some reason, I cannot get her out of my brain. And now, as I fuck her slowly, savoring every explosively delicious touch, I don't get the sense that this will be enough to satiate my craving.

Mia whimpers into my mouth, her supple body quivering beneath me as I press urgently into her depths, driving my cockhead into her G-spot.

“God, yer so feekin’ wet,” I rasp against her lips, the slickness of her perfect pussy making my cock rock-hard.

“You feel so good,” she breathes, her sky-blue eyes closed off to me as her face morphs into an expression of almost pained ecstasy. She stole the words right out of my mouth.

Hands exploring her supple curves and taut breasts, I knead them, eliciting a cry from her sexy lips. And as her walls tighten around my hard length, I start to drive inside her more vigorously.

She's close to release. I can feel it, and God, I want to feel her come on my cock.

Mia whimpers, goosebumps rising across her flesh and tightening her nipples. I pinch one playfully, rolling the nub between my finger and thumb. That's all it takes.

Exploding around me, Mia gushes fresh arousal as her pussy throbs. And suddenly, I can see why it was so hard for Luke and Zach to hold their loads after making her orgasm. At the time, it took all my self-restraint to subdue the jealousy of knowing that they got to make her come with more than just their tongues and fingers. But knowing that I'm the only one who got to come in her mouth was deeply satisfying in its own way.

And now, I've more than made up for it by having her all to myself.

She feels sinfully good, her walls gripping me like a vise, milking me, almost begging me to fill her with my seed.

I've never been so tempted.

The thought of claiming her pussy for my own.

But I couldn't do that to her.

She would be miserable stuck in a relationship with me long-term.

Grinding my teeth, I hold out as long as I can. But as soon as the aftershocks subside and Mia's legs relax, slipping from my hips to release me, I wrap my arm around her waist and flip her.

Seeming more than eager, Mia rests her cheek against the sheets, her hands finding the headboard above her as she goes onto her knees, pressing her ass into the air. She's gorgeous, her round butt a masterpiece as her cheeks spread to offer up her sexy holes.

She watches me over her shoulder, her blue eyes wide with anticipation as she sucks her lower lip between her teeth.

"Ye ready for me, Angel?" I circle her puckered asshole to demonstrate what I mean.

"Yes," she breathes, her clit twitching with my touch.

Collecting her slick arousal on my fingers, I wet her tight hole. Then I press my cockhead to the dark entrance and slowly ease inside. Mia whimpers, her hips trembling as she struggles to take my thick girth.

Reaching around her hips, I find her clit with my fingers and slowly start to circle. She gasps, her ass relaxing slightly as I build her excitement. As I penetrate her inch by inch, she pants with the effort of stretching to accommodate me.

"Good girl," I breathe, stroking her ass cheek with my free palm once I'm buried inside her to the hilt.

Then I start to rock inside her as I ease two fingers into her dripping pussy. Mia gasps, her hips rolling as I claim her, and damn, but she feels good. More than that, she comes alive beneath my touch, making me ache to please her, to know just how crazy I can drive her.

We move together, finding a rhythm as I penetrate her deeply, and I know I won't be able to hold out much longer.

She feels so agonizingly incredible.

“Oh, God, I’m gonna come,” Mia gasps.

Deep satisfaction consumes me at the thought, and I know I’ll be right behind her. “Come fer me, Mia,” I command.

And she does, crying out as her pussy spasms around my fingers, her ass gripping my cock. I groan with the aching tightness that demands I follow her into oblivion. As she throbs, her body shuddering beneath mine, I find my release.

Burst after burst of cum fills her ass as my hips jerk with the force of my orgasm.

“Bloody hell,” I gasp as we slow together.

Mia releases an airy laugh, her chest pressing against the mattress as her cheek stays resting on the bed. I ease out of her, taking my time to ensure she’s comfortable. Then I climb from the bed and bend to pick up my pants.

Damn, that girl is hot. And adorable as she slides from the bed with a suddenly shy look.

Though I’m sure I would tire of her eventually, like I do with every girl, I haven’t even scratched the surface with Mia. I’m intent on enjoying as much pleasure with her over this holiday as possible—at least until her father arrives.

I shrug into my shirt, buttoning and tucking it in to avoid doing a visible walk of shame from her room. Then I move to Mia’s side once again. She’s already dressed in her robe, hiding her perfect figure beneath the rose-colored silk.

“Well, that was fun,” I state, letting my hands rest on her hips.

But Mia doesn’t quite meet my eyes. “Yeah,” she agrees, her tone distracted. She flashes me a quick smile before turning her attention to getting ready.

It might be the first time a girl has reached the point of disinterest before me, and it awakens in me an unfamiliar fire. I’m not done with Mia, and somehow, her disconnect makes me want to prove my worth to her all the more.

Running my finger along her jaw, I gently guide Mia's chin up so I can cover her lips with a soft, playful kiss. And I get a hint of that same magnetic connection. I feel her resolve start to weaken.

She doesn't pull away.

When I finally break the kiss, she's breathless, her blue eyes dilated with fresh excitement.

"Cilian, I need to get ready for cocktail hour. I'm hosting until Daddy can get here."

The flash of guilt is unmistakable, and I know her hesitation is about the forbidden nature of our attraction. But I just can't help myself. The sound of my name on her lips is just too sweet.

"I know, I'll leave ya be," I assure her. Then I grin wickedly. "If you'll let me find you again at the end of the night."

MIA

My breath catches in my lungs at Cilian's playful demand. I'm in trouble now because I already have Zach ready and willing to take responsibility for my child, but Cilian is making all my wildest fantasies come true.

I've lost count of how many of my fantasies he's starred in where he would slip up to my room, unbeknownst to my father or any other guests. I've wanted him to want me so desperately that he might seek me out, to think of me when I'm not around.

And now he's offering me all of it on a platter.

I haven't told Cilian about the baby because I don't know how he might react. I generally get the feeling that Cilian does not intend to settle down—ever—and that a baby would only be an anchor hindering his freedom. But that doesn't stop my overwhelming attraction to him.

And while I know it could land me in a heap of trouble if Zach finds out I slept with Cilian again—after Zach and I already discussed the baby—I can't resist the Irish playboy. Besides, Zach was part of the foursome. He must not be completely against the idea of open relationships or multiple partners. At least I can hope.

“Okay,” I breathe, scarcely daring to believe I just agreed to sleep with Cilian again, later tonight. But the responding molten excitement that burns in his green gaze wipes away my hesitation.

“Tonight, then,” he murmurs, brushing a chaste kiss across my lips. Then he slinks quietly from my room like a panther who’s spotted his prey.

Releasing a shuddering breath, I try to collect myself. Then I head to the bathroom to clean up and get dressed. I’m ready in record time, thanks in part to Cilian’s quick decision about my dress. I head downstairs just as the entry hall grandfather clock chimes the hour.

The guests enter the same vaulted living room as where the welcome party took place, and the room floods with lively chatter and holiday cheer in an instant as the serving staff hand out glass mugs of mulled cider and spiked hot chocolate.

“Mia, darling, you look positively stunning,” Mrs. Duwalling says affectionately as she and her husband approach me with broad smiles.

“Oh, thank you.” I beam, smoothing the front of my dress with one hand. But I can’t help the flush of embarrassment that stains my cheeks as I think about the person who chose it for me.

My eyes flick subconsciously in Cilian’s direction at the thought of him, and my heart skips a beat when I realize he was already watching me.

“Your father’s gone all out this year, hasn’t he?” Mrs. Duwalling asks, bringing my attention back to her.

I force myself to maintain eye contact with her. “Yes, but then again, he does every year. Daddy’s such a Christmas fanatic.” I laugh to ensure she knows it was a joke.

Mrs. Duwalling giggles softly. “When will he be arriving? I always look forward to our cocktail hour chats and catching up on the latest New York gossip.”

Something I’m sure I’ll star in once it gets out that I’m pregnant. I shove the thought aside.

“As soon as the storm passes, I’m sure.”

“Yes, we barely got out in time,” Mr. Long states, inserting himself into the conversation.

And when my gaze shifts instinctually in his direction, I find Zach watching me from near the bright glow of the Christmas tree.

My heart breaks into a sprint as I wonder if he might not catch Cilian watching me. *And what if they talk?* Sweat beads along my hairline as I start to consider the deeper consequences of my actions. Zach might not be okay about my sleeping with Cilian. I never told Cilian I'm pregnant. The likelihood of this all blowing up in my face is quickly becoming more probable.

Too anxious to stand still, I quickly bow out of the conversation to start making my way around the room, greeting the guests who didn't make it to the welcome reception, offering compliments and friendly exchanges where I can.

But it seems that the guests have a far different plan for me.

"What are the auction prizes for this year, Mia?" Ms. Silverton asks, her eyes glinting with anticipation. She's managed to outbid everyone on the five-golden-rings-themed item for the last four years running, and I'm sure she's excited to learn about the fresh spoils she'll take home.

"Telling you would ruin the surprise," I tease, continuing to move so I won't get pulled into a long-winded conversation with her.

"Mia, have you heard from your father? Someone told me the storm has become a proper blizzard. I wonder if he won't be able to make it at all," Dr. Anderson observes, his palm resting authoritatively over the buttons of his blazer that barely contain his prominent belly.

Dear God, please don't let *that* be true. I think I can survive hosting for a day. Two, max. But the entire Christmas weekend? While I also try to untangle the terrible web of emotions I've made between me and three of my dad's closest friends? I don't think so.

Once again, my eyes flick toward Zach, then Cilian, and my gut clenches as I hope neither reads into the looks I send toward the other. I've never tried juggling men before—let alone trying to sort out which one should be the father of my child. My cheeks heat with anxiety as I start to worry that I'm going to completely muck this up.

What if I walk away from this weekend without anyone by my side?

And all the while, Daddy's guests keep me occupied, unloading their questions on me until I don't know how my father does it.

"I'm sure the staff would be happy to get you another bathrobe, Mr. Baird," I assure him, trying to scrub his story from my brain for *why* he might need a new bathrobe already. "I'll let them know immediately."

Gesturing to one of the wait staff, I make my way toward them to deliver the request—only to be apprehended by Gus Hannigan, Daddy's lawyer.

"Mia, I'm so glad I managed to catch you," he says with a smile. "I've been trying to set up a time with your father about some paperwork regarding Florence and Hanson. Perhaps you'd have better success calling him home from one of his exotic vacations with his beautiful new—"

"I'll speak with him." Luke's deep Southern accent cuts the lawyer's request short as his fingers come to rest lightly on my elbow. "No need to concern his daughter when I'm perfectly capable of contacting my business partner."

Heady relief washes through me as the overwhelming influx of people demanding my attention seems to calm in an instant.

"Mia, you're needed in the kitchen," he adds, his blue eyes inscrutable as he peers down at me.

"Oh, sure. Of course," I agree, glad to have a reason to get out of the chattering throng of guests.

Usually, I'm good at working a crowd. But taking my dad's place as host feels like an entirely different animal. And

it doesn't help at all to have two sexy men watching me from various corners of the room, each with information I would rather they not discuss with the other—not until I've had a minute to find my equilibrium.

But Luke's strong, steady hand on my elbow somehow helps to ease that anxiety, and no one slows me down this time as he escorts me from the festive room.

"Phew!" I breathe, unable to control the sound of relief as Luke and I enter the hallway.

Luke chuckles. "Not quite ready for the spotlight in that crowd?"

"Man, apparently not," I agree, following him toward the kitchen. "I would much rather face a culinary disaster any day of the week."

Another lower chuckle rumbles from his chest, the sound soothing, like waves breaking against the shore. "I thought as much."

"What do they need me for?" I jerk my chin toward the kitchen doors to indicate who I mean.

"Oh, nothing. You just looked like you really needed a reprieve," he says, flashing me a smile as he pushes open the door and gestures for me to enter first.

The room is astonishingly quiet, and my heart flutters at Luke's rather chivalrous statement. He could see me in distress, and he knew right where to take me to help me calm down.

The kitchen has always felt like home to me because I love to bake. It's one of the few areas my father and I have spent hours of quality time together—decorating Christmas cookies before he hired his own chef to do that for him.

Warmth floods me at the sweet gesture, quickly followed by the realization that we're alone in the kitchen. And Luke is standing dangerously close.

LUKE

I've watched Mia for years now, and I know what an intelligent and independent young woman she is, so seeing her get so flustered tonight triggered a protective instinct in me. The crowd Mike and I mingle with can be vultures. When they smell fresh meat, they can't just leave it be.

And though poor Mia has grown up mingling with them, I'm sure most haven't looked at her as an adult until today. I've always thought of himself as something of an uncle to Mia, but after Halloween, I know we've blurred a line that can't be unblurred.

She might have given me plenty of signs to tell me that she doesn't belong to me—nor has any intention to—but that doesn't stop the Southern gentleman in me from needing to keep her safe, to see her happy.

"Thanks," Mia breathes, her shoulders relaxing in her striking deep-blue velvet dress.

She looks positively regal in it, showing off just enough of her legs to make my mouth water while the cut is nothing short of elegant. The only hint of flirtation in its shape is the low-V back that draws a sharp point at the base of her spine, showing off her muscular back without revealing much more.

"Is everything alright, Mia?" I ask, keeping my voice low, though the concern still carries through it.

She's been stressed since she arrived, and I can't help but feel it might be more than the unexpected pressure of having

to host her father's parties. And the last thing in the world I want is to be the cause of her anxiety.

But I can't help but notice the way Cilian and Zach have been watching her tonight. And I'm perfectly aware that I'm guilty of the offense myself.

"Alright? Why wouldn't I be?" Her blue eyes are wide and innocent, but something's off in her tone.

"You're just not acting quite like yourself, and I wondered whether... Cilian and Zach have been coming on too strong?" I know I should include myself in that category, but I am trying my best to be a gentleman.

But she doesn't say anything, her lips parting as if to speak, but no sound comes out.

Pressing forward, I broach the topic I know I really need to speak with her about. "Of course, I could be completely off. But I only thought it right that we talk about what happened on Halloween. I don't know if you've spoken to them, but I want you to know I would never want to pressure you or take advantage... All I'm saying is that I want to make sure you're okay... with... everything."

Wow, I'm not usually so bad with my words. But my concern leaves me fumbling, stumbling through my thoughts like an untried teenager.

And to my horror, Mia starts to cry.

In an instant, I'm completely out of my element. I don't normally do emotions. I'm a cut-throat business tycoon, skilled at negotiations and getting down to the bottom line. But watching her fall apart right in front of me—and knowing I'm likely the cause of it to some degree—rips me apart.

"Hey, hey," I murmur, pulling her into my arms and tucking her head beneath my chin. Her cheek is soft and warm against my chest as she shakes in my embrace. "Talk to me, Mia. Please," I beg, out of my depth but desperate to help.

"I r-really did enjoy what we did on Halloween," she insists, tilting her head to peer up at me.

But she doesn't try to step back, so I hold her close, enjoying the feel of her body pressed to mine a little too much. Still, I want to comfort her in whatever way she'll let me. Mia sniffles, wiping the tears roughly from her cheeks and pulling herself together before her makeup starts to run.

"I had such a good time and never imagined I could be so attracted to all three of you..."

The words carry a subtle sting, knowing she's as attracted to Zach and Cilian as I hoped she would be to me. But she *does* feel something for me, which was more than I dared hope for until right now.

"But, Luke... that night led to... unexpected consequences, and now I don't know what I'm going to do."

For a fraction of a second, my stomach sinks at the foreboding in her words. But what she says next stops my heart completely.

"I'm pregnant, and I'm terrified of telling Daddy when I don't even know which of you is the father." Her palms cover the radiant blush pooling in her cheeks.

For a moment, I don't know what to say. *There's a possibility that I could be the father?* Of course there is. Though none of us finished inside her, we weren't particularly careful throughout. I feel terrible—for her.

She can't possibly have hoped to get pregnant so quickly out of college, and certainly not without a boyfriend to call her own. She must be terrified, lost, feeling entirely too alone. And from the worry in her eyes, I'm confident she would rather at least know who to say is the father when she tells Mike.

I would happily step up to the plate. Mia's father might not like knowing I got his little girl pregnant, but I'm confident he would prefer to see me, his business partner and a well-established, dependable man, by her side than the deadbeat party boys she's brought home in the past. But when it comes down to it, she has three viable men who could be the father—

and maybe she hopes one of the other two will want to step up to the task.

“Have you told Zach or Cilian?”

“Zach,” she confesses, and the name sends a surprising barb of disappointment through my chest.

It hurts to think she would go to him first when I’ve been a far bigger part of her life. I can see why she might—seeing as he’s already a father and has a soft-spoken kind of confidence. But she hardly knows Zach because he’s spent the majority of the last ten years in an ugly divorce with his wife.

Taking a slow breath, I push aside my own feelings because there are more important matters to consider right now. Like how Mia can possibly make a good decision about what she wants to do when she doesn’t even know where I stand on the matter.

“Mia, I know you haven’t asked, and maybe that’s because you’ve already made up your mind, but I can’t let you go further down your path without making sure you consider all your options.”

“What... do you mean?” she asks, her expression growing more guarded.

“I’m crazy about you. And I think you should know that before you go choosing Zach as your best option. I hadn’t intended to pursue my feelings for you out of respect for your father—and because I hadn’t dreamed you would be attracted to a man my age. But that all changed after Halloween. And as long as Zach’s throwing his hat in the ring to be the father, I would like to as well.”

Mia stares at me in astonishment, her lips slightly parted in her disbelief.

Before she can object, I plow forward, intent on arguing my case before she tells me no. “I may not be who first comes to mind when you consider the optimal father, but that doesn’t mean I’m not more than capable—of not just caring for our child, but you as well. And I wouldn’t just consider it my responsibility to take care of you both—regardless of the

paternity—I think you and I could have a real chance at a happy life together. If you're interested.”

Her breaths are shallower now, almost ragged, as her breasts swell against my chest. And I know I've gotten through to her. Daring to hope, I lean slowly in as I brush my knuckles across her rosy cheek.

I kiss her boldly, pouring into it all the desire and love I feel for her.

To my delight, she doesn't pull away.

I cradle the back of her head, combing my fingers into her golden hair as I deepen the kiss. And when my tongue strokes between her teeth, hers meets mine in a tantalizing dance.

Christ, this girl is sexy.

Not only is she beautiful, intelligent, and charming, but she's also even more enticing in her vulnerability. She makes me want to protect her, to keep her safe from harm—even the emotional kind that comes with having to tell hard truths.

And if she'll let me, I would gladly take the bullet and stand with her to tell Mike about the family we're starting.

When I finally break our kiss, we're both breathless, and I peer into her sky-blue eyes with new hope because she's looking at me with a genuine love that lights my soul up like a Christmas tree.

“You don't have to make up your mind right now,” I murmur, knowing she has big decisions on her plate. “But think about it and get back to me, okay?”

Mia nods, the deep appreciation washing across her features and softening them in her relief.

The door swings open with an audible groan, and Mia tenses once more in my arms at the unexpected intrusion. I can't imagine she would like it if the kitchen staff found out about us before she told her father.

But as we both turn to look at the man standing in the doorway, I know things are about to get far more complicated.

Zach eyes us with a blazing intensity.

His expression masks the emotion behind his dark gaze.

MIA

I nstinctually, I push away from Luke, my gut twisting at the pain in Zach's eyes. I know I couldn't possibly have handled this worse than I have. Confused by the turn of events, I don't know which way to turn.

Both Zach and Luke would make wonderful options for different reasons. But as I feel myself suddenly trapped between a rock and a hard place, I start to panic, my heart hammering as I stand frozen, unable to make up my mind.

"So, have you told Luke, then?" Zach asks, his voice surprisingly calm despite the heat of his wounded gaze.

"I know about the baby, if that's what you're referring to," Luke says, his deep Southern drawl confident.

Zach nods, his shoulders squaring, and for a moment, I think he might just turn and leave. The thought of it breaks my heart. I bite my tongue to stop myself from apologizing. Because, the truth is, I don't know who's in the wrong here. We all chose to sleep together that night. So, how could they possibly think I would know what to do in this crazy situation?

Considering I'm the youngest by far, I should be the last one trying to make sense of it. And yet, here I am. Unfortunately, I'm the only one who *can* make this decision. But I've never been so scared of making the wrong one in my life.

"Have you changed your mind?" Zach asks, leveling me with a steady gaze, one shockingly composed and devoid of judgment.

Anything less than that, and I might have broken into tears once more. Because I'm clinging to my sanity by a thread here.

"Do you not want me to be the father?"

My heart slams against my ribs as the question lingers in the air for several endless seconds.

"I... don't know yet," I confess, my voice trembling dangerously with a potent combination of fear and remorse. I don't like putting them in this situation any more than they would enjoy being in it.

"Well, as long as you're still making up your mind, I think it's only fair that I remind you of what I have to offer." Zach crosses the kitchen in several long strides, his dark eyes sparkling with dangerous intention.

He draws me the rest of the way out of Luke's arms to wrap me in a fierce embrace. His soft, full lips cover mine with the perfect blend of commanding tenderness—a promise to treat me like a goddess and please me like a minx.

Heat sears across my flesh as my nerves melt into something far more sensual, and though I only just kissed Luke, I can't help but melt into Zach's arms. *How can anyone kiss this well?*

"And for direct comparison..." Luke cuts in, his strong arm snaking around my waist to extricate me from Zach's hold.

I can't help the giggle that escapes me as I feel like the rope in a juvenile game of Tug-of-War. And at the same time, it feels pretty amazing to have such gorgeous silver foxes warring for my attention.

The humor dies on my lips as Luke kisses me with renewed passion, the heat of his touch intense and protective. And when Zach's lips find the curve of my neck, my heart leaps into my throat.

It's just like Halloween, both men working together to focus on my pleasure. I gasp into Luke's mouth, my hand

reaching back to comb into Zach's hair, and in an instant, all my common sense flies out the window.

The men seem capable of enough rational thought that they slowly steer me toward the industrial-sized kitchen pantry, pulling the door shut behind us and dousing us in utter darkness.

Hot breath washes across my exposed neck, raising goosebumps along my back as we all breathe heavily together in the black room. Then strong hands grip my hips, turning me until I'm facing the opposite direction.

Zach kisses me deeply, his soft scruff gentle on my chin and easily identifiable. Meanwhile, Luke's lips trail kisses down my neck, his fingers guiding the velvet fabric of my dress off my shoulders.

The low back doesn't allow for a bra, so as the sleeves slip over my hands, the velvet top falling forward, I'm suddenly bare from the waist up. Luke groans as he reaches around to explore my body and discovers this.

"No bra, Mia?" he rasps beside my ear, his voice playfully scolding.

"Fuck," Zach breathes, breaking our kiss to lean in and capture my free nipple between his lips.

I gasp, arching back into Luke's muscular chest as a jolt of excitement blasts through my core. And then two sets of strong, masculine hands are exploring every inch of me, kneading my breasts, stroking up my legs... tracing the insides of my thighs.

I shiver as one hand cups my throbbing clit over my lacy thong, and suddenly, I'm grateful for the intense dark as I think about how I had Cilian inside me not two hours ago. The heat of embarrassment climbs up my neck, pooling in my cheeks, but I'm too turned on to let it distract me for long.

As I tip my head back to kiss Luke, he leans over me, finding my lips almost instinctively. Then two fingers hook around my panties, pushing them aside. A moment later, they

trace my slick slit, collecting my arousal before they lightly circle my throbbing clit.

I moan, the sound lusty and deep as the overwhelming stimulation fills me with a carnal desire. I want both of them, all of them, touching me, kissing me, filling me up. I've never felt so alive, and now that I know just how good it can be, I'm not sure I can go back to anything less.

It doesn't matter that Cilian satisfied me so deeply such a short time ago. I need these two men to touch me with a desperation I've never known. And they seem more than ready to oblige.

Zach massages my breasts, lightly pinching my nipples as he tortures me playfully, and all the while, Luke strokes between my folds, his fingers like silk as they ease inside my dripping entrance.

"You like it when we play with you?" he murmurs against my lips, his low voice tinged with amusement.

"Yes," I whimper, my hands gripping Zach's broad shoulders to keep me steady.

"You want me to make you come?"

My gut clenches in anticipation of his promise. "Yes," I breathe, my body quivering.

Luke's fingers penetrate me deeply, the heel of his palm brushing against my clit as he stimulates every part of me. It feels so good, I can barely breathe. Clinging to Zach, I pant, my breaths vanishing between Luke's gorgeous lips as he kisses me hungrily.

This isn't going to take long. As the intense darkness removes all my other senses, I focus on the exhilarating pleasure of so many hands and lips claiming me at once. My walls tighten around Luke's fingers, my clit thrumming with need.

And suddenly, I'm toppling over the edge into ecstasy. I cry out, unable to stay quiet in my delirious state. Luke hums appreciatively, his lips spreading in a slow grin, displaying his satisfaction to me.

Two hands find the hem of my form-fitting dress, sliding it up over my hips until the velvet fabric is bunched around my waist. Then Zach sinks onto his knees before me.

His fingers hook inside my panty line, and he drags them slowly down my legs before lifting my feet free. I have no clue where they go next. I can only hope they don't get left behind in the pantry. But right now, I'm not sure I really care.

Because Luke's fingers are suddenly replaced by Zach's lips. As he sucks my clit into his warm mouth, I'm more than a little grateful that Luke's still kissing me because I can't stop the moan of pleasure that escapes me.

Luke's tongue delves deep between my lips as he consumes me. As I tremble in his arms, he breaks our kiss momentarily. One finger brushes lightly against my lower lip, and I can smell the tang of my juices just before my sexy cowboy licks his fingers clean.

"You taste delicious," he purrs, his lips returning to mine with renewed greed.

One arm encircles my waist, the other hand cupping each breast in turn and lightly playing with my nipples that are just starting to grow tender with my pregnancy hormones.

But I can hardly blame them for the intensity of my exhilaration despite the fact that I just came. At any moment, I think my brain might short circuit from the overwhelming pleasure, and when Zach's fingers slip inside my pussy, I know I'm a goner.

His tongue continues to circle my clit as his fingers stroke my G-spot, intensifying my already mind-blowing excitement. I'm overwhelmed with the pleasure of Luke's hands on my body, his lips claiming my mouth, while Zach sucks my clit and fingers me into oblivion.

All the stress and indecision wash away with the intensity of my pleasure, and I shudder violently as my second orgasm rips through me like a hurricane. Chest heaving as I ride out my waves of euphoria, I lean heavily against Luke's chest, my legs too weak to hold me up any longer.

Luke's iron cock presses between my ass cheeks, the rough teeth of his zipper gently biting my skin. I would love nothing more than to have them fuck me right here in the pantry.

As Zach straightens before me, I roll my hips back against Luke, silently suggesting what I want. He releases a low, rumbling growl, his hand tightening on my breast.

Then, in a flash, I feel as though a bucket of ice water has been dumped over my head. The pantry door opens, allowing a stream of golden light into the dark space. For the briefest moment, I'm left exposed as the stunned cook stares at me, mouth agape.

Luke acts quickly, shifting to shield me as best he can. But I'm too panic-stricken and mortified to stay. Shoving my dress back down over my thighs, I scoop up the top half to cover my bare breasts.

Then I flee, leaving Zach and Luke behind.

MIA

I shrug into the sleeves of my dress as I run, racing back to my room to try and collect myself. I can't believe how quickly my plan seems to have unraveled. What was I thinking, trying to sort things out in the middle of Daddy's Christmas retreat?

Reaching my room, I slip inside and close the door, leaning against it as if to fortify it from invaders. The breaths gasp heavily from my lungs as I try to wrap my head around what just happened.

A shiver races down my spine as my mind eagerly provides snapshots of the steamy scene that just took place between me, Zach, and Luke in the pantry. I close my eyes against the force of the arousal it awakens in me.

I've completely lost control of the situation.

I know I need to go back to the party and play the hostess, but I think my quandary just turned into a competition, and now I don't know what to do about the baby, its father, or whom I should rely on.

In truth, I want all three.

They each have something special to offer, something I *need* in my life. An astonishing loyalty from Zach, passion from Cilian, and a deep understanding from Luke. I don't believe in soulmates or *The One* after how many bimbos my dad has brought home throughout the years. But after spending a bit more time with my dad's friends, I'm starting to see the appeal in genuine connections.

And I'm worried I'll make the wrong choice.

Thumping my head against the door, I growl, "Pull yourself together, Mia. You have a responsibility to your child and to being as good a mom as you can be. You can't be waffling about and indecisive."

But I do need more time to think, and unfortunately, I'm not sure I'm going to get that time until after Daddy arrives.

Sighing heavily, I head to my bathroom to check my reflection in the mirror. Surprisingly, I don't look too terrible. My hair's a little mussed but easy to comb back into place. And my lips are swollen from so much kissing.

I straighten my dress, smoothing the velvety fabric down over my legs, then I meet my eyes in the mirror. They're almost feverish in their excitement, and I try to calm my racing heart with slow, steady breaths.

Only after my heartbeat slows do I head back out to the hall.

As I reach the landing overlooking the living room, I pause. Zach's daughter idles by the stairs, phone in hand, her lips twisted in a look of indecision as she stares down at the screen.

"Hey, Lindsey," I say, approaching her carefully because I don't want to interrupt something if she's on the phone.

"Oh, hey, Mia," she says, sliding the device into the pocket of her long-sleeve black-and-red-plaid dress.

"Were you planning on joining the party?"

"I, uh, yeah. I mean, I was trying to get ahold of my mom before I came down, but she's probably out shopping or something," she says, casually waving away her mom's lack of availability.

But I know that rounded look to her shoulders, the way her chin quivers ever so slightly. She wishes her mom might have cared enough to answer the phone regardless of her thrilling Paris activities and new, exciting company.

My heart goes out to Lindsey. I can't imagine the pain of coming in second to a life of frivolous play. At least my sense of abandonment stems from a father who works too many hours in his drive toward success. While still not the priority in his life, at least I know that part of his motivation is taking care of me.

I'm also perfectly familiar with the typical evasive maneuvers adults tend to perform to avoid uncomfortable conversations around an absentee parent and the pity it evokes. I'm not about to do that to Lindsey. She needs a friend right now, not a pep talk or someone to rationalize why her mom behaves the way she does.

"I'm sorry you won't get to spend Christmas with your mom," I say, leaning against the railing to look down on the party with Lindsey.

"Thanks," she says, fidgeting with the cuff of her sleeve.

"Wouldn't it be nice if, just once, *they* called to say they miss us?" I add, glancing at her from the corner of my eye.

"Right?" she gushes, her exasperation overwhelming her sense of teenage blasé.

I'd like to say it gets easier over time, but it doesn't. As I think about the text Daddy left me in regard to the Christmas party and his delay, it might be easy for someone to assume I'm his assistant rather than his only daughter whom he loves dearly.

I've learned to understand it over the years. His lack of affectionate words or ability to spend quality time doesn't mean he loves me any less. He just doesn't have the capacity to show it. But nothing I say can reconcile Lindsey's sense of rejection she feels now. Only she can do that.

Then she has to discover for herself how to make it right.

I do by meeting my father on his terms, going to the parties I know he'll attend—unless a blizzard snows him out. But that doesn't stop my occasionally juvenile attempts to get his attention. Like what I did on Halloween.

I shove the thoughts aside, focusing my attention on Lindsey now. “When’s the last time you saw your mom?”

“Fourth of July?” she says, though she seems unsure. “We were supposed to do something at the end of summer vacation, too, but then ‘something came up.’ That’s why she promised to spend Christmas on the beach with me. I mean, it’s not like I made a big fuss over having to change my plans... but missing out on *Hawaii*?” Hurt seeps into her tone, coloring her words with a heavy disappointment.

Still, I know that the real pain doesn’t come from missing out on her vacation. Lindsey needs her mom. She needs the affirmation that the two people in the world who are supposed to love her unconditionally do. And it sounds like Zach’s ex-wife is failing miserably in that regard.

“You know, the nice thing about it is that, eventually, you grow up. And then you can go see all those places you talked about anyway.” I flash her a conspiratorial smile, and she returns it. “Where will you go first?” I ask, hoping to lift her spirits by imagining all the beautiful places in the world she could go.

Lindsey frowns as she considers my question seriously. “I don’t know. I mean, Hawaii sounds pretty amazing. Or Greece. Japan, maybe? I do love anime.”

“Me too! Wow, I never realized you were so cool.”

She giggles, giving me a playful eye roll that I’m quickly learning is her main form of communication. “Where did you go when you first traveled?”

Smiling so hard my cheeks hurt, I study her for a moment. “Promise you won’t laugh at me?”

“Why would I laugh at you about traveling?”

“Because for my first solo trip, I flew all around Europe exploring the different kinds of Christmas cookies each country makes. I stopped in Paris but didn’t see the Eiffel tower. Went to Rome but skipped the Colosseum. I did see the famous Christmas shop in Rothenberg while I was in Germany, though.”

Lindsey laughs despite my request, then she claps her hands over her mouth. “Sorry, you asked me not to. I actually think that’s super cool. You must really like Christmas cookies then.”

“Are you kidding me? What’s better than a Christmas cookie? They come in all shapes and sizes, with an infinite variety of flavors and traditions. Not to mention, they’re known worldwide for summoning a jolly old man who will leave you presents? Come on. Christmas cookies are where it’s at.”

“Do you ever bake Christmas cookies?” Lindsey asks.

“At least once a year,” I assure her. “In my book, that’s about the most festive part of Christmas.”

Her smile falters ever so slightly, and she looks down at her hands. “I never learned how to bake,” she admits. “Dad burns just about everything he puts in the oven, though he can cook a mean steak.”

I can hear the unspoken words as clearly as if she’s said them—her mom never took the time to teach her.

“Well, maybe sometime, if your parents don’t mind, you and I can bake Christmas cookies together,” I suggest. I hope I’m not overstepping to suggest it. But it isn’t hard to like Zach’s spirited daughter, and I would never say no to a baking buddy.

“I’d like that,” Lindsey agrees.

Well, I think I’ve delayed my responsibilities as long as I dare. “Care to join me at the party?” I suggest, looking over the railing at my dad’s guests once more.

The chatter has formed a soft din that rises above the cheery holiday music playing in the background, giving the room a general warmth that makes me brave enough to go back in.

“Sure,” Lindsey agrees.

And as we head downstairs, I can’t help but feel grateful for her company. Not only is she fun to talk to, but she’ll

provide a nice buffer from the drama unfolding in my life. Because I'm confident all three men will have the good sense not to talk about our very adult situation in front of the thirteen-year-old.

ZACHARY

The party is in full swing, the clinking of glasses and the murmur of voices creating a lively hum with Christmas songs playing in the background. The festive smells of cinnamon and peppermint linger in the air, but my mind is far from the joyful mood of the evening. I can't shake the gnawing feeling that I might have messed up with Mia—again.

Worried, I glance around the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but she's nowhere to be seen. My heart still feels like lead in my stomach as I play Mia's quick departure on a loop inside my mind, her expression of intense mortification earlier as she fled like her life depended on it.

I let out a heavy sigh, my stomach knotting with a profound sense of guilt. The fact that she might be carrying my child only adds to the weight of my conscience. She's too young to be facing the consequences of our wild Halloween night. And though I want to do right by her, I worry that she might not realize I'm her best choice.

I just wish I could talk to her, to put her mind at ease that she made the right decision to come to me. I get why she would tell Luke. She must know him far better than she knows me, seeing as he's her father's business partner. But it's not hard to see the pitfalls of him as a father. And I want her to know that, while she might not know me as well, I'm more than willing to put in the effort.

Then, as if the universe is playing tricks on me, I spot her entering the room once more. She's not alone, either. To my surprise, she's accompanied by none other than my stubborn teenage daughter, who had adamantly refused to make an appearance for the social hour earlier. She wanted to stay in the room and mope.

I don't know how she did it, but I love the fact that Mia managed to talk Lindsey downstairs. The sight of them together warms my heart, the tension in my chest easing at the sight of the two most important women in my life seeming to hit it off.

Mia and Lindsey are deep in conversation, their laughter floating above the crowd as they keep their heads conspiratorially close together. Seeing them like that, I can't help but feel a surge of hope, an inkling that's been growing in the back of my mind.

Being with Mia is not just about supporting her because she might be carrying my child. I realize I have genuine feelings for her, and I believe we could actually build a happy family together.

Then, like an unwelcome shadow, I notice Luke standing next to me. His steady gaze is fixed on me, and I can almost feel the disapproval radiating off him.

"Zach, you shouldn't be in this race," Luke murmurs, his voice tinged with concern. "Mia is just starting her life, and now she's got an unexpected pregnancy to deal with. You shouldn't be trying to bring her into your world with all its complications."

I turn to look at Luke, frustration and defensiveness rising within me. "Who are you to judge whether my life might be suitable for Mia? She came to me, and in my eyes, that means she trusts that I would be a positive support to her and the baby. Sure, I've been through a lot—raising a teenage daughter with an ex-wife who doesn't give a crap and refuses to make life easy when it comes to shared responsibility. But I know how to navigate things. And Hannah and I have been on cordial enough terms for well over a year now. It shouldn't

affect Mia in the slightest that I have a past. I can be in a relationship and give her and the baby the stability they need. And clearly, she must respect my parenting skills if she came to me.”

Luke narrows his eyes at me, his expression hardening. “Maybe she just didn’t understand her full range of possibilities. But now that she knows, you have to realize that I might be the better option for her. I don’t have a complicated past, an ex who’ll keep causing trouble, or a teenage daughter who might not like the idea of a stepmom. I can provide Mia with a fresh start, a clean slate, and a life without all your baggage.”

I shake my head, the tension between us growing. “It looks to me like Lindsey might be more open to the possibility of a mother figure than you give her credit for. And besides, it’s not just about providing Mia with a clean slate. It’s about recognizing the kind of emotional support and experience she’ll need moving forward, which I can give her since I’ve been down this road before. Meanwhile, you’ve never cared enough about a relationship to even consider children before. And let’s not forget about your work, Luke. You’re so married to it that Mia would practically be a single mother with an extra-large spending allowance. Is that what she needs?”

“You know what? Fuck you, Zach. You want to look down your nose at me about taking my work seriously, but I’m the one who’s been around to see Mia grow into the fine young woman she’s become. And I assure you, she’s more than capable of wrapping her mind around the kind of hours I work.” Luke scowls at me, his face suddenly thunderous.

I release a soft huff in response. “You sure about that?” Zach asks. “Because one of the main reasons Mike and I have grown apart over the years is a particular conversation I had with him after Mia’s mom came to me in tears about the sense of abandonment her daughter felt at never having her father around.”

Wintry silence settles between us as Luke considers my words.

“He didn’t want to slow down, too set on building the empire you two have amassed. And eventually, that’s how he lost Karen.”

Mike’s first and only wife is the closest I’ve come to seeing the man truly happy, and it pains me to know how far he’s strayed from that life since they separated. Still, I come to see my old friend whenever I can because I hope that someday, I might see him that happy again.

I just don’t want Mia to follow in her mother’s footsteps and choose a man who will leave her feeling abandoned once more. As petty as the thought is, I don’t doubt that I’ll be able to win Mia as long as I have the patience to outlast Luke. All I have to do is wait out the holiday, and he’ll be gone once again.

Hopefully then, Mia will see that Luke and her father are one and the same when it comes to work-life balance. Neither knows how to call the workday done.

“You know, I might be less like Mike than you give me credit for,” Luke says, his voice low and flat as his eyes follow Mia intently around the room.

“Oh? How so?” I fight to rein in my petty sense of competitiveness, wrestling my tone under control. Because as much as I might think I would be the better choice for Mia, I don’t actually dislike Luke in any way. When it comes down to it, I have a great deal of respect for the man. Just not when it comes to Mia raising a child with him over me.

“I set aside my personal relationships to focus on my career, you’re right. But I haven’t left the possibility for love behind me,” Luke says, turning his intense gaze back on me. “I’ve reached my business goals, and I’m proud of my success. But now I’m ready to slow down. I want to find a wife, to start a family. And I’m ready to put in the time and energy it will take to raise this child with Mia.”

I could almost believe him, his words are so convincing. And maybe that’s because Luke truly seems to believe them himself. But I’ve known men like him all my life, and as much as they say they’re ready to settle down, I don’t see him being

capable of doing that permanently. Some men work to live, and some men live to work. That's a core part of a personality and not something easily changed, in my experience.

"Well, then, I guess all I can do now is wish you luck trying to win Mia's heart, because I assure you, I have no intention of stepping aside."

"And neither do I," Luke agrees.

"May the best man win?" I offer my hand in a gentleman's agreement. No petty tricks to come out on top. This is about putting our best foot forward and letting Mia decide.

"May the best man win," he agrees, clasping my hand with a cocky grin.

"But I think we can both agree that Cilian does not get to be a part of this competition."

"Fuck no," Luke says adamantly. "I suspect Mia's too smart to think he would be, anyhow. He's a playboy and always will be. The ladies might love him, but Mia must see that he's ill-equipped to be a father."

"Or a husband," I agree.

Luke scoffs. "I don't doubt that if she approached him about it, he'd probably turn and run the other way."

That draws a laugh from me as I picture the billionaire Irishman from a notoriously shady family tucking his tail between his legs over the prospect of being called Dad.

MIA

Dinner feels like an intricate dance, Luke and Zach finding seats on either side of me while Lindsey sits on the far side of her father. Which would have been fine had they not started the meal out by having something of a tug-of-war over the chair they each attempted to pull out for me.

I watch in stunned silence as Luke wins the battle, offering me a charming smile as he gestures for me to take my seat.

“Thanks,” I say, though my eyes shift to Lindsey, and we share a silently bewildered look.

The teen just shrugs, like I should expect the men’s behavior to seem as irrational as she always does.

Then we settle in at the long table full of house guests who laugh and joke, carrying their conversations in from the cocktail hour.

“Have you had a chance to settle into your room yet, Mia?” Zach asks, his smile amiable as the serving staff offers each guest a glass of wine to accompany their meal.

“Oh, um, yes, thanks,” I say, answering Zach’s question. Then I realize the server thought I was asking for wine, and I scramble to recover the situation. “Sorry, none for me tonight,” I say, flashing the staff member an embarrassed smile as I cover my wine glass just in time to stop him short.

When I realize it’s the same young man who walked in on us in the pantry, my blush intensifies. But he either never got a

good look at my face or he's very skilled at hiding his feelings on the matter because he gives a politely indifferent bow before moving on to Luke's glass.

"You look lovely this evening, by the way," Luke says on my other side, drawing my attention.

"Thanks," I murmur, heat flaming in my cheeks as I receive attention on either side of myself.

"Yes, stunning," Zach agrees.

Both men make eye contact across me, and a moment of tense silence fills the space as they have a wordless exchange.

Daddy's butler approaches then, bending to murmur in my ear, "The food is ready as soon as you are."

Oh, God. Right. A toast. "Thank you, Mason." I've never done one of these before, and butterflies erupt in my stomach at the thought of addressing Daddy's guests in his stead. My eyes shift momentarily to my father's empty chair at the head of the table, and not for the first time in my life, I wish he were here.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, I rise, smoothing my skirt down over my thighs. Luke dutifully takes up his knife and taps his wine glass, calling for silence. I flash him a grateful smile, then turn my eyes to the rest of the room.

They land on Cilian, who sits at the far end of the table, his green eyes intent as they study me with silent interest.

Pull yourself together, I scold myself as the words vanish from my lips. Clearing my throat, I drag my gaze away from the gorgeous Irishman who keeps popping into my head.

"Thank you all for coming to another of Daddy's infamous Christmas retreats," I say, drawing a soft chuckle from the gathered guests. "I know he wishes more than anything that he could be here to greet you himself, and I can't possibly do his holiday spirit the justice it deserves."

Another hushed round of laughter, and I release a giddy breath as I smile, relaxing when they seem more than willing to accept me as temporary MC.

“Daddy loves these retreats, and the reason he invites you all here, year after year, is because you’re what fills his life with joy. You make this season feel special because you all are his family. So let’s raise a toast to the man of the hour.”

A collective murmuring shuffle occurs as each person follows suit, lifting their wine and mixed cocktails while I white-knuckle my glass of water.

“To Mr. Mike Florence. May the snow fall soft and the plow drivers stay fresh so he can join us shortly.”

“Hear, hear!”

Glasses clink as the gathered guests echo the cheers.

“Now, please enjoy the feast!” As I settle back into my seat with a heavy sigh, the conversation around us resumes, and I fight to get my heart rate back under control.

“That was beautiful, Mia,” Zach says with a soft smile.

I return the gesture gratefully. Then, collecting my napkin from my plate, I spread it across my lap as my dinner is set before me. But when I glance in Luke’s direction, I just catch the tendon in his jaw popping as he grinds his teeth and stares daggers at the plate set before him, clearly frustrated by Zach’s attempt to flatter me.

Throughout the course of the meal, the men on either side of me grow more blatant as they vie for my attention with polite gestures and thoughtful conversation. Luke and Zach, both pillars in my father’s social circle, seem entirely oblivious to the rest of the dinner party. They’re too determined to outshine each other in their efforts to hold my attention.

And their attentiveness, though well-intentioned, creates a palpable tension that I struggle to navigate. I steal glances at each of them in turn, trying to decipher the unspoken challenge that seems to have arisen between them.

I can’t help but feel guilty, caught in the middle of this unspoken rivalry. Luke and Zach are my father’s long-time friends, and the idea that their friendship is now hanging by a thread because of their interest in me is unsettling. I wish they

could see that I'm not a prize to be won, that my heart is not a trophy to be claimed in some unnamed competition.

As their antics grow more flagrant, I find my thoughts drifting to Cilian, sitting at the far end of the table. Whenever our eyes meet, a rush of warmth floods my cheeks. I can't shake the memory of our stolen time together earlier in the day, the way he effortlessly makes me feel special, sexy, and exciting. He has this captivating, dangerous edge that has always drawn me in, a magnetism that I find hard to resist.

It's not that Luke and Zach aren't wonderful in their own ways. They know how to make me feel cherished and respected, and they each possess qualities that I admire. But something about Cilian ignites a fire in me. He stirs my soul in ways I can't quite articulate. It's both exhilarating and unnerving, the way he makes me yearn for more.

I can only give a breath of relief as dinner draws to a close and the guests start to migrate toward the lavishly decorated ballroom, adorned in festive Christmas decor reminiscent of scenes from *The Nutcracker*.

I find myself once again needing to play the role of hostess for my father, as it's time for the next event—an elaborate silent auction Daddy funds every year, finding extravagant and rare items to bid on with all proceeds going to various charities.

The theme, of course, revolves around *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, a theme my father has stuck to unapologetically since the first year he hosted the auction. So, as I climb onto the stage and the live orchestra hired to play the entirety of *The Nutcracker's* soundtrack brings their song to a close, I brace myself for what can only be a ridiculous announcement concerning far too many birds.

Picking up the mic, I gather everyone's attention once more. "I think you all know what time it is," I announce as the dancing and revelry calm and people turn to the stage. "What is Christmas without Mike Florence's Silent Night Auction? Am I right?"

I'm met with boisterous applause.

“I think by now, Daddy’s silent auction is beyond needing an introduction, so let’s hop right into this year’s items up for bid. Shall we?”

More cheers, and I smile as I look out at the crowd who somehow manage to enjoy my dad’s silly antics year after year.

“Now, remember, you have until cocktail hour tomorrow to bid on these items, and the prize goes to the highest bidder. Thank you all for participating, and as our causes this year involve fighting homelessness and child hunger through various charities around the globe, I hope you’ll all dig deep to find your spirit of giving and blow us away with your bids.”

Cilian gives an ear-splitting whistle of support that draws my eyes, and the room erupts with enthusiastic applause.

“Well, then, without further ado, our first auction item involves not just a partridge in a pear tree but a year’s supply of fresh fruit from the very ethically sourced and entirely organic orchard of Partridge and Wren!”

Applause follows, and I can’t help but laugh at Daddy’s creative genius. I don’t know how he manages to find something new each year.

“Next, we have a lovebird’s paradise involving a guided tour of the world-famous Weltvogelpark Walsrode bird sanctuary in Germany as well as a week-long stay in a very charming and romantic castle just one town away.”

Once again, the item is met with enthusiastic applause.

As I continue on, reading the prizes Daddy picked out to represent the three French hens, four calling birds, five golden rings, six laying geese, seven swimming swans, and eight milking maids, the gathered guests seem entirely enthusiastic about the luxurious packages.

I’m just blown away by not only the creativity it must take to think them up but the dedication of researching and booking each one. In some ways, my dad truly is a genius, and I love that this is one of the areas where he dedicates his creative talents.

Then my eyes land on the ninth item.

Exasperation washes over me as I read out loud from the description card naming the prize my father has listed. Essentially, he's offered me up as a dance partner for *nine* dances at the Christmas Eve ball. And he didn't even bother asking me.

I can barely hear the applause after that one as my ears ring with embarrassment. I am not one for dancing—not the ballroom kind, anyway. No one's going to want to bid to dance with me—not at the rate they would pay for a week-long stay in some German fairy-tale castle. *What was Daddy thinking?*

I read the final three bidding items with a numb tongue, scarcely absorbing what he picked out for the ten leaping lords, eleven piping pipers, and twelve drumming drummers. The last is a private concert, I gather, which will be far more spectacular than dancing with *me*.

“There you have it, ladies and gentlemen,” I finish in a daze. “Your twelve items to spread holiday cheer. Best of luck! And the winners will be announced tomorrow, here, in the ballroom, at nine p.m. sharp.”

I force a smile, masking the bemusement bubbling within me, then I thank everyone for their participation before excusing myself from the stage. I climb down on shaky legs, trying not to think about the part I'm supposed to play in my dad's ridiculous auction.

And as I make my way toward the edge of the ballroom, seeking a moment of respite from the overwhelming pressure, I can't help but feel a surge of conflicting emotions. The classical music of *The Nutcracker* and the twinkling lights create a whimsical ambiance, but my mind is far from the enchanting festivities.

Maybe it's the foreign hormones of pregnancy starting to kick in, but I find myself completely overwhelmed by this year's party. Not only have I been thrust into my dad's traditional role, one I'm more confident than ever I don't want to step into in the long haul. But I'm also grappling with a

tangled web of emotions, unsure of where my heart truly lies amid the affections of these three captivating men.

As the music and laughter fill the ballroom, I sense all three men watching me, waiting for an answer.

CILIAN

The ballroom is abuzz with the lingering energy of Mia's presentation. The grand chandeliers cast a warm glow over the polished dance floor, and the strains of the festive music weave through the air.

I watch Mia from across the room as she steps away from the mic, her expression a mixture of relief and distraction. Something's bothering her, that much is clear. The subtle furrow in her brow and the distant look in her eyes speak volumes.

As Mia glides toward the door leading out to the balcony, I follow her, intrigued. Besides, it's not often I encounter a woman who manages to captivate my attention as she has.

The crisp winter air hits my lungs like a shot of dry ice as I step onto the sweeping veranda that runs the length of the chalet. My eyes fall on the beautiful velvet-clad figure standing alone by the railing.

We're the only two who have dared to venture outside, despite the heat of the feverish temperature of the party in the ballroom. Though I suppose it's not surprising as my breath billows before me like a cloud of smoke.

Snow falls at such a soft, gradual pace, it almost floats to the ground like fall leaves. It brings with it a stillness, reminding me that so many of the creatures in the forest around us are hibernating.

The sudden quiet is both intimate and peaceful. But Mia seems less than at ease.

Strolling casually across the deck to stand beside her, I try to break the ice as I alert her to my presence. “So, tell me, what’s a man gotta do ta win a place in yer father’s auction next year?” I tease.

She turns, her golden hair glowing in the light cast through the windows. Her smile makes my heart skip a beat unexpectedly. Her blue eyes match the humor in that smile, but behind the very welcome warmth of her greeting, something is most definitely troubling her.

Based on her reaction during the silent auction announcement, I suspect it’s in no small part to the fact that her father put her up for bid this year. And while I fully intend to put money down on those dances, I get the feeling she would much rather not be made into a spectacle.

“I’m t’inking I’d make a nice auction item for the *lairds a-leapin’*. What do you reckon?” I continue, unwilling to let the joke lie until I get a proper reaction from her.

Her laughter is a welcome sound, a melody that warms the chilly air and makes me smile in return. “Lords a-leaping, huh? I would love to see that,” she teases, her shoulders relaxing slightly as she crosses her arms against the cold and leans back against the railing.

“There she is,” I say, a smirk playing on my lips. “I was starten’ to wonder who that serious girl was, standin’ alone out here. I didn’ recognize her.”

Mia cocks her head, her eyes questioning. “What do you mean?”

“Yer usually the life of the party. Ye could light the world up with that laugh, ye know.”

A beautiful rose color pools in Mia’s cheeks, and she drops her eyes to look down at her fancy high heels, her red-painted toes peeking out from beneath the champagne-colored patent leather.

“But seriously, what’s eating ya? Ye don’t seem yerself.” I mirror her body language, leaning against the railing just beside her as I cross my arms.

Mia sighs, her shoulders sagging slightly. “It’s just... I don’t know. I have a lot on my mind, I guess. The expectations now that I’m done with college. Daddy wanting me to follow in his footsteps, pick a career, make something of myself. But nothing I do ever seems important enough.” She shakes her head, her lips twitching ever so slightly, giving away the hurt behind her sense of rejection.

“And then he has to go and do something like this.” Her tone shifts quickly into exasperation, covering her vulnerability as she gestures to the party that’s in full swing on the other side of the glass. “Well, you know what I mean. Adding me as an item for the auction. And he did it without even asking me.”

Her shoulders slump as she crosses her arms once again. “I don’t know. I realize it couldn’t be helped, but hosting just makes me very aware of how different I am from him. How little I want the spotlight, the prestige. I just feel like he wants me to have it all figured out. Now. And that what I choose to do with my life should be something he can boast about to all his friends...”

Her eyes flick toward me on that last word, her expression making it clear that, in her mind, I still fit into that category, though I find my relationship to Mia shifting quite rapidly into something more personal.

“Have ye ever told him that?” I ask gently, for once dropping my efforts at charm to meet her on her more vulnerable level.

She shakes her head, her eyes growing round as she considers the possibility. “I don’t want to disappoint him,” she murmurs.

I study her face, the emotion in her startlingly blue gaze. Surprisingly, I find myself wanting to understand her, to break through the façade she wears for the world. She’s always seemed like a daddy’s girl. Spunky, yes. But always eager to please him.

Yet, something about her confession feels so much more real. And surprisingly relatable.

“I get it, ye know,” I say. “It’s like swimming without land in sight, innit? Especially when ye come from money. Yer lost at sea, drownin’ in expectations, and ye don’t even know in which direction ye want ta go.”

She looks at me, surprise flickering in her eyes. “You feel the same way?”

“I did.” My gaze locked on hers. “More than you can imagine. It took me years to learn how to separate moy happiness from that of my family’s. But I promise ye it’s worth it in the end. Ye shouldn’t have to be what people want ye ta be. It’s yer life, Mia. And just because yer parents raised ye, doesn’t mean they own ye.”

Realization washes across her features as Mia searches my face more closely, seeming to seek an answer to some question she doesn’t voice. But whatever she’s searching for, she must find it because her eyes soften and she nods. “You felt like you owed them.”

It’s not a question, it’s a statement, and it’s the closest anyone has come to really understanding the world I was born into.

“That’s the thing. Money can buy a lot of things, but it can’t buy ye a purpose. And it’s easy to get swept away in other people’s waves.”

The silence between us is filled with unspoken understanding, and Mia’s gaze fills with an emotion I can’t quite name. This deeper connection between us isn’t what I expected to find tonight, and strangely, it makes her even more alluring.

“But enough about me,” I say with a smile, attempting to lighten the mood. “What about ye? What do ye like to do? What makes ye tick?”

She tilts her head, considering the question. “I love baking. Cookies, in particular. I enjoy decorating them, making them look festive. It’s partly why I love Christmas so much.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. “Baking, huh? That’s unexpected.”

“How so?” she asks, her tone verging on defensive.

“I only meant that yer so personable. I t’ought you might be more interested in somet’in’ that involved talkin’ to people.”

Mia giggles, her blush intensifying. “Well, thanks. I do like talking to people, but I don’t see how that’s a calling.”

“Ye ever t’ought of making a career out of bakin’, then? I’d pay top dollar for someone to decorate Christmas cookies I could pass off as me own.”

Mia laughs, then a newfound excitement lights her eyes as a genuine smile spreads across her face. “You know, I never thought of that.”

“Really?” I ask, letting my arms fall to my sides.

“Yeah. Making a business out of Christmas cookies?” Mia pushes off the railing, her eyes growing distant as she turns to face me. “It’s actually brilliant, Cilian.”

Her eyes refocus on mine, and the electric connection between us crackles to life. Then her fingers curl around the collar of my shirt as she suddenly leans into me. Our lips meet in a fiery kiss, the intensity surprising even me.

And after a moment of stunned tension, I relax into the exchange. Heat races through my veins as I wrap my arms around Mia, holding her close as she kisses me deeply. The passion with which she consumes me awakens my desire. But this connection goes beyond physical attraction. Somewhere along the line, we developed a shared understanding that goes deeper than the surface. Beyond the outlandishly good sex.

When she finally pulls away, Mia peers up into my eyes with a need that makes my lungs freeze.

“I have to go,” she breathes.

“What, now?” I ask, astonished by the suddenness of her statement.

“Yes. Now.” She laughs, her expression endearing. “But, Cilian? Thank you.” She presses another soft kiss to my lips.

Then she's gone, vanishing through the door like she's on a mission.

The feel of her lips lingers on mine, though, like the ghost of Christmas past, staying with me long after she disappears into the crowd. And it reminds me just why I came to Aspen this Christmas.

MIA

The night is quiet, interrupted only by the soft hum of the oven and the occasional clatter of utensils. I glance at the clock—it's well past midnight, long since the last of the party guests would have gone to bed. I should be exhausted, but the excitement pulsing through my veins keeps me going.

Cilian inspired me to come up with a business plan, not just one I think might work, but one I intend to show Daddy when he arrives. I think this one might actually make him proud. And at least then, I won't be a complete disappointment when I reveal that I'm pregnant with one of his best friends' child.

At least I can hope.

The scents of sugar and cinnamon fill the air as I continue to roll out the cookie dough. Christmas carols play softly in the background, a stark contrast to the chaos swirling in my mind. The idea of presenting my father with beautifully decorated Christmas cookies seems like the perfect way to pitch my idea.

Though I intend to make it into a year-round business. *After all, people need cookies for baby showers, right? Birthdays? Wedding events?* Not to mention all the other holidays of the year. Yes, I really think this might work.

I glance at the clock again, realizing that the morning staff will be arriving in just a few short hours. I need to finish and clean up before they find me here. Hopefully, Stephanie, the

head chef, won't be too upset with me for having raided her supplies.

I work quickly, my hands moving almost mechanically as I cut out festive shapes, bake a batch, let them cool, then carefully ice each cookie with vibrant colors and creative holiday designs. The kitchen becomes a makeshift workshop, and I am the tireless artist behind it all.

As the first light of dawn sneaks through the kitchen window, I finally finish the last cookie. Exhaustion hits me like a cartoon piano dropped from the second story, and I decide to sit down for a moment, resting my arms on the counter and cradling my head in the crook of my elbow. The hard, cold surface of the granite is surprisingly comfortable. My eyelids feel heavy, and before I know it, I've succumbed to sleep.

I'm awakened by the sounds of the kitchen staff entering, their bright chatter filling the room in an instant. Then they stop, seeming shocked to find me, bleary eyed, with a rat's nest for hair, sitting up next to several cooling racks of decorated sugar cookies.

Panicking, I glance at the clock—it's later than I thought.

"Morning," I say hastily, slipping off the bar stool as I try to clean up the remains of my mess.

"Morning, Miss Mia," Stephanie says, her voice stunned as she takes in the sight of me. "Late night?"

Usually, that question means something very different when she asks me. Normally, it means I'm dragging my feet into the kitchen for a bloody Mary to revive me after a night of drinking.

I giggle nervously. "Yeah. Sorry, I got a wild hair to start baking."

"That's alright. It looks like you've done my job for me—and did a better one of it, I might add." She smiles, and I return the gesture with a breathy laugh.

"I'll just clean this up and get out of your hair," I promise.

With a burst of energy, I gather the cookies and hastily stash them in the fridge to help the icing set properly. I can't help but smile at the colorful array before me. This, I hope, will be the start of something good.

But when I try to clean up the flour-coated counters, Stephanie won't hear of it. She shoos me from the kitchen, assuring me that my father hired the kitchen staff to clean as well as cook.

Relieved of my duties and with the cookies safely tucked away, I head to my room to take a shower and change. It's going to be a long day after so few hours of sleep. But at least the morning is left fairly open for guests to enjoy the house and the slopes—should they get the inkling to ski—as well as the town of Aspen at their leisure.

Maybe I'll have time to sneak in a nap before Daddy arrives—or I'm required to continue my duties as MC.

As I round the corner to my room, I find Zach standing in the hallway. His eyes widen in surprise when he sees me, and I stop short, suddenly self-conscious of the fact that I'm still wearing last night's dress and heels.

"Hey," he says, his gaze lingering on me as he turns to face me fully.

"Hey." I try hastily to fix the messy bun I threw my hair up into last night while I was cooking. Then I continue walking, approaching him slowly as I make my way toward my room.

"Did you... spend the night with Luke, then?" he asks, a hint of jealousy tinging his voice. But when I meet his eyes, he smiles apologetically as if he knows he has no right to be upset.

"No," I answer quickly. "I was actually up all night baking." I laugh breathlessly, my embarrassment apparent in the sound.

Zach raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. "You must be a passionate cook to be so fully immersed in it."

I blush, not sure how to respond. *What does he mean by that?* Before I can ask, he reaches out and wipes a bit of

frosting off my cheek with his finger. The touch is surprisingly intimate, sending shivers down my spine. And suddenly, the hallway feels twenty degrees warmer.

Zach looks at the frosting on his finger then smirks. “Mind if I have a taste?” he asks playfully. Then he puts the frosting-covered digit pointedly in his mouth, his eyes never leaving mine.

A fire ignites within me, a warmth that I hadn’t expected. The chemistry between us is palpable, and it amazes me that I could have such strong feelings for Zach when I’ve had a crush on Cilian for so long.

“Wow,” he says, licking his lips. “You’ve got some serious talent.”

From his tone, I’m not entirely sure he’s talking about the frosting, but it doesn’t take long to find out. Before I can think up a response, Zach leans in and kisses me.

Though I don’t like comparing them, I can’t help it as my mind starts to connect the dots, and as I think about the kiss I shared with Cilian last night, I’m surprised to find that my chemistry with Zach is just as strong.

The world around us starts to fade as he captures me in his embrace, and for a moment, it’s just him and me. I melt into him, forgetting everything else that’s turned my life on its head lately. It’s as if time stands still and all that matters is the warmth of his lips against mine.

When we finally pull away, I’m breathless. Zach looks at me with a newfound intensity, and I realize that something has shifted between us. It’s not just a kiss. It’s a spark I hadn’t anticipated.

A comfortable silence lingers between us as I stare up into his dark, fathomless eyes, and I can’t help but feel a sense of ease. *If I’m going to have a baby, shouldn’t I be looking for stability, dependability in a man? Especially when there’s such a strong attraction between us?*

At the very least, I should give it a chance.

Zach seems to read the decision in my face, and as I rise up onto my toes, wrapping my arms around his neck, he turns me, pressing my back up against the door to my room, trapping me there in a dangerously sexy way.

Then his lips cover mine once more, his tongue stroking between my teeth to taste me.

A soft moan escapes my lips, vanishing into his mouth, and I reach behind me for the door handle, ready to take this somewhere a little more private. Following me into the room, Zach keeps his arms wrapped snugly around my waist, his strong, lean body curving against mine as he holds me close.

It feels shockingly good to be held by him, a pleasant surprise that quickly makes my feelings for him intensify. Zach is the safe choice, the man I know not only wants to be a father but is *good* at it. He's the one I could objectively choose as the right choice.

But realizing that there might be something more between us—that he might just know how to own my desire too? Maybe I've just been overthinking things because I don't see how any girl could say no to a man who kisses like this.

The door closes behind us with a sharp bang, and like the gun announcing the start of a race, that seems to be Zach's sign. His hands travel down my back to cup my ass, and his long fingers splay over the flesh, grabbing large handfuls as he massages it appreciatively.

Heat pools in my belly at the way he touches me, his confidence silent and iron-clad. In it is the promise of my satisfaction and the fact that he knows exactly how to give it to me.

How can a single dad be this intoxicatingly sexy?

I gasp as his hands travel lower to grasp my thighs. And then he hoists me up, wrapping my legs around his hips as he turns toward the long dresser that stands beside my door. My dress rides up, exposing my thighs as he sets me down on the edge of the light wood. His hips press against it, resting between my legs as he keeps me close.

“God, I want you, Mia,” he rasps, his voice throaty and low.

“I want you too,” I breathe, my heart hammering to escape the cage of my ribs.

Cilian, I knew I wanted. And having him all to myself had been something I’d dreamed about more times than I can count. *But Zach?* He’s caught me completely by surprise. I’m blindsided by the desperate need to feel him inside me. And more so by the fact that I’m glad we’re here alone.

The way he kisses me says he knows exactly how I feel, and as his fingers slip beneath the hem of my dress, slowly pushing it up over my hips, I’m not about to stop him.

He takes his time, despite the agonizing impatience in his kiss, and the tension builds between us until I think I might explode with overwhelming desire. I lift my arms as he drags my dress up my body, exposing my flesh inch by inch.

A ravenous groan escapes him as my breasts come into full view—my lack of a bra seeming to turn him on just as much this time as it did last night in the pantry. It makes my core tighten to know I turn him on, and my nipples pucker with fresh need.

The cool air feels good against my skin, releasing the feverish heat of my excitement. Goosebumps rise on my back and arms at the sudden shift in temperature, and when his arms wrap around me once more, his palms covering my exposed back, I sigh against him, my legs wrapping around his waist.

“I’m gonna make you cry my name,” he promises, one hand cradling my jaw as his lips hover over mine, his warm, frosting-sweetened breath washing over me.

And then he kisses me with a passion that sets my soul on fire.

ZACHARY

I can barely breathe, I need Mia so desperately. But I'm determined to take my time, to show her just how well I can please her. I dreamed of touching her last night after what happened in the pantry.

Mia's addicting, like a drug, and as much as I want to do the responsible thing and be the man beside her when she faces her father, that's no longer what drives me. I don't believe she can depend on either of the other two men to step up to the task, so I'm determined to win Mia's heart—for my sake and for hers.

But this chemistry between us is something out of this world.

I only hope she feels it as intensely as I do. Because if she does, there's no chance in hell she'll pick one of the other two.

Mia's fingers tremble as she finds the buttons of my shirt, but I don't think it's from nerves. Her quick breaths and sinfully sweet kisses tell me she's overcome with desire.

God, that's hot.

Easing her struggle, I grip the collar of my shirt and pull it up over my head, tossing it aside so I can pull her close and feel her warm, supple breasts against my chest. Her fingers press into my back as she clings to me, her lips soft and eager as she kisses me.

Then her hands trail lightly down my back, releasing a shiver up my spine. Her fingers fall on the waist of my jeans,

and she follows them around to the button, which she undoes before carefully unzipping the seam.

“Take me, Zach,” she pleads.

Holy hell, I don’t think I’ve ever heard something so sexy.

Shoving my pants and boxers down in one go, I kick them off at the same time as my shoes. Then I hook my fingers around the elastic of Mia’s panties. She lifts her hips off the dresser with her palms, and I strip her of the skimpy fabric, tossing them over my shoulder.

Then I grip her thighs, pulling her to the edge of the dresser as I hold her steady. Mia gasps from the sudden shift in balance. Her palms brace against the wood, her back leaning against the wall, and her blue eyes meet mine with electric intensity.

Throbbing with the need to be inside her, my cock stands at the ready. But I take a moment, not wanting to rush Mia if she has any reservations. She wets her full lips with her tongue, and they remain parted ever so slightly as she breathes raggedly.

“I want to come inside your pussy, Mia,” I rasp, my arousal leaving me hoarse.

Color blossoms in her cheeks, and for a moment, I think I’ve taken things too far.

But then a coy smile curls her lips. “It’s not like I can get more pregnant,” she teases. “And that sounds amazing.”

I can’t stand it. This girl is sheer perfection. I bring my lips crashing against hers as I kiss her violently, my tongue stroking deep inside her mouth. As I wrap one arm firmly around her waist, using the other to guide her knee, I find her slick entrance with my silken head.

We moan together as I ease inside her, inch by inch, relishing her warm, wet entrance. Her body welcomes me, her walls tightening around my hard length as fresh excitement gushes from her depths.

She feels incredible.

As I start to rock inside her, sliding in and out as I penetrate her deeply, Mia rolls her hips, finding a rhythm that puts us perfectly in sync. Throbbing with anticipation, I press inside Mia, slowly building the intensity as I find that special spot that drives her crazy.

I know I've hit it when she starts to tremble, her legs wrapping around my hips as her mewling cries begin to grow louder. As I drive harder, the force of my thrusts makes the dresser thump against the wall behind her.

"Oh, God, please don't stop!" she begs as her walls constrict around me.

I'm not sure I could even if I wanted to. She feels so good, I might just rather die than stop now. I know we're making too much noise. Anyone in the hallway would surely hear us. But I can't bring myself to care.

Mia sobs as she finds her release, her pussy fluttering around my cock, milking me desperately. I groan, bracing against the wall behind her with one hand as I fight to hold my load. Because as ready as I am to come inside her, I'm not quite done giving her pleasure.

Breasts heaving, Mia slings her arms around my shoulders, clinging to me as she breathes heavily in her ecstasy. I still inside her, relishing the feel of her body twitching against my body, her walls throbbing forcefully around me.

And every time I shift even an inch, she twitches to life once more.

Only after the last of her aftershocks subside do I scoop her up off the dresser, my arms resting beneath her hips as I carry her to the bed. Falling on top of her, I pin her there, breaking our kiss so I can peer deep into her eyes.

"I love making you come," I breathe.

She nips playfully at my lower lip, making my cock twitch inside her.

"You can make me come as many times as you like," she assures me.

I smile wickedly. Then, with a snarl, I claim her lips once more.

Mia arches beneath me, her hips rolling as she tells me what she wants. I hook an arm beneath each knee, spreading her legs further as I lift her legs, bringing her feet up by my shoulders in a deep stretch.

Then I start to move inside her once again. She feels infinitely tighter in this position, and Mia whimpers against my lips.

“Too much?” I ask, my pace slowing because I don’t want to hurt her.

“No, it feels *so* good,” she moans.

Christ. Just the sound of her pleasure-laced voice makes me want to come.

Stroking my tongue between her lips, I taste her deeply, penetrating her mouth in the same smooth, silky way I take her with my cock. Mia pants and whimpers, the soft sounds somehow even more scintillating than the desperate cries from before.

Our skin slaps together in a deliciously carnal sound, and I feel the tension building at the base of my spine, warning me that I can’t hold out much longer. She just feels so agonizingly good.

“Oh, God, I’m gonna come!” she gasps, the astonishment in her voice bringing a smile to my lips.

“Come with me, angel,” I murmur, my balls tightening at the thought of filling her up.

Mia explodes around me, her pussy throbbing as she grips me like a vise, and that’s all it takes to launch me into oblivion. I grunt, shoving deep inside her as my balls empty, releasing spurts of hot cum inside her depths.

Colorful dots explode across the back of my eyelids as an intense, all-consuming satisfaction seeps through me, that feeling of contentment that runs bone deep when everything feels perfectly as it should be.

I never imagined I might fall for the daughter of my childhood best friend. But damn, I don't think I'll ever find someone I fit with so perfectly as Mia. We breathe together, heavily. Our foreheads pressed together, our lips just inches apart, we share the air as we soak in the blissful aftermath of our tryst.

"Wow," I murmur, licking my lips as I slowly come down from my high.

"Yeah," she agrees breathily.

Easing out of her, I roll onto the bed beside her to stare up at the ceiling. We lie in companionable silence for several minutes, simply catching our breath as my fingers rest lightly on top of her thigh.

And though I would love nothing more than to hear her tell me what I wish this means, I don't pressure her to make a decision. To pick me. Even if she can't, Luke will probably have to bow out of the competition for one work reason or another in the end.

And when he does, I'll be here. Waiting.

Cilian, on the other hand, I'm less confident about where they stand. I did see her kiss him last evening. But then she just walked away.

Sitting up, I comb my fingers through my hair, trying to shake off my nagging curiosity. Maybe it's none of my business, but I would rather know what I'm up against. And when it comes down to it, even though Cilian might not want to be a father, he could prove to be my stiffest competition.

Rising from the bed, I stoop to collect my clothing. As if taking that as a cue, Mia takes a silk robe from the hook on the inside of her closet door and shrugs into it, covering up her perfect body.

"Can I ask you something?" I say, trying to keep my tone light as I finish buttoning my jeans and shrug into my shirt.

"Of course," Mia says, releasing her hair from her messy bun as she turns to look at me. She runs her fingers through the silken locks, nearly driving me to distraction.

Clearing my throat, I wait until I'm sure I can keep my expression carefully blank. "Have you told Cilian you're pregnant?"

Mia bites her lip, and from the guilty expression that flashes across her face, I can guess her answer. It's also clearly eating at her that she hasn't said anything to him.

"It's perfectly reasonable to hesitate," I say gently. When it comes to the Irish playboy, I wouldn't blame her. "He's not known for being responsible. And you shouldn't feel bad if you know who you want to raise your child—or who you don't want to raise them. Your secret's safe with me."

A soft blush colors her cheeks, and she gives me an embarrassed smile. "Thanks, Zach. You know, it's not even that I'm sure I don't want him to be the father. It's just... Oh, I don't know anymore. It feels like everything's just gotten so out of control. I don't know *what* to think."

My heart sinks a little at her words, but I can't say I blame her. Trying to sort out an unplanned pregnancy at such a young age—that has to be stressful enough. I can't imagine needing to pick a father for the child at the same time.

All I know is that I want Mia to pick what's right for her because I know how hard it can be when you end up trying to raise a child with the wrong person. And I don't want to put her in that position. Not if I can help it.

With a nod, I give her a reassuring smile. "You'll figure it out. You're a smart girl. And if you need anything... I'm here." Closing the distance between us, I brush a chaste kiss across her lips. Then I head for the door to leave Mia in peace.

Stepping into the hallway, I close the door softly behind me, hoping I don't call anyone's attention to my exit. But as I turn toward the purple suite, I freeze, my heart skipping a beat.

"Hey, kiddo, I didn't see you there," I say, heat flashing through me as I find Lindsey watching me with knowing eyes. "Have you been there long?"

"I was just coming to get breakfast. I thought that's where you might be," she says, her tone pointedly noting that I'm *not*

at breakfast.

I scratch the nape of my neck, guilt gnawing at me. At least I don't think she must have heard us, and suddenly, I'm intensely grateful for that. Then, to my astonishment, Lindsey smiles.

"You know, Dad, it's okay if you like Mia," she says matter-of-factly.

"Really?" Straightening, I try to mask the surprise in my voice.

Lindsey gives a casual one-shoulder shrug as she strolls closer to me. "Yeah. I mean, she's pretty cool. And besides, you spend too much time worrying about my well-being, anyway. But I'm not a little girl anymore, Dad. I can take care of myself, and I want you to be happy."

My heart swells at my daughter's compassionate words, entirely devoid of her typical snark. And though I know she would rather be caught dead than hugging her dad, I pull her into a bear hug. I'm so proud of Lindsey for how she's grown. Even though she would be perfectly within her rights to expect my undivided attention during this trip, she's more concerned with my happiness than whether I'm entertaining enough to make up for her absent mom.

"Thanks, Linds," I murmur, releasing her before she can get too grumpy with me.

And to my surprise, she actually gives my waist a brief squeeze of her own. "Want some breakfast?" she suggests.

"Heck yes. I'm starving." I turn to follow her as we head toward the dining room, where we're sure to find a smorgasbord of breakfast options.

I only cast one quick, hopeful glance back at Mia's door.

MIA

Snow blankets the beautiful trees outside my window in a serene hush, creating a picturesque scene that belies the chaos inside me. My nerves are frayed, ragged as I remain torn between my feelings for three wonderful men. I know I need to make a decision, but it feels like every time I start to get an inkling of who would be best, another one charges into the lead.

The shower that was supposed to help calm me down did little more than make me clean. And though I took my time drying and styling my hair, then applying my makeup for the day, I'm still no closer to understanding what's inside my heart—or my head.

This would be so much easier if there were a clear and obvious front-runner, a right man for the job. But in truth, when I initially thought this might be a decision between my heart and my head, I've discovered that all three men have managed to find a place in both.

Yes, Zach is the safe bet—a single father who knows how to parent well and has already agreed to help me raise my child. But I never imagined he could be so patient with me to let me choose between him and two other men. And on top of that, our chemistry is out of this world.

Then there's Luke, the steadfast Southern gentleman who not only has proven more than capable of taking care of me but is sensitive enough to recognize when I need support emotionally. The way he pulled me into the kitchen—my place

of comfort—to ask me what was bothering me? No hardened, workaholic businessman does that. Not to mention, he has the body of a god and the dreamiest blue eyes I’ve ever seen. And worker’s hands that know how to make me sing.

But Cilian has come out of nowhere to blow me away. The physical stuff was a given. In truth, I’ve been so attracted to him for so long, I could easily fall into the trap of wanting him solely because he’s the bad boy every girl wants. But there’s more to him than that—more than I ever could have imagined, really. He opened up to me last night in a way I never dreamed. I can see the hardship of his past, and I know he’s overcome it—not just to become his own man, but to become a man compassionate enough to support me when he saw me struggling. He’s the one who helped me find my dream, a vision for my future when I’ve been lost in the trees. It takes a truly empathetic person to not only recognize my challenge but to also guide me gently enough to let me discover my own way.

“Ugh!” I growl, flopping back onto my bed. I don’t know what to do.

And on top of it, Daddy has yet to arrive. I can’t stand the waiting any longer, wondering if he’s going to make it to Aspen today. Succumbing to my frustration, I pull my phone out of the back pocket of my jeans to call my dad.

My fingers dance nervously over the screen as I dial his number.

Then I wait, the anticipation building with each ring.

“*Hey, sweetheart,*” he greets finally, his familiar gruff voice momentarily easing my anxiety.

“Hey, Daddy,” I reply, relief in my voice. “Are you still planning to make it for the Christmas party?”

His hesitation is palpable as he pauses before answering. “*It doesn’t look good, Mia. All chartered flights out of New York have been canceled due to the storm. My pilot won’t risk it until things start to clear. I’m sorry.*”

The weight of disappointment settles heavily on my shoulders. “Oh, okay,” I manage to say, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

“I know it’s not what you wanted to hear. But I’m sure you’re doing a great job hosting in my stead. Are you having fun?” His attempt at reassurance carries through the phone with a false optimism which I can’t quite tell whether I’m imagining.

A forced smile graces my lips. “Yeah, sure. I’m trying my best. But I know everyone here is missing you.” I know I am, but I don’t say as much because my dad and I just don’t say that kind of thing.

“That’s my girl,” he says gruffly. *“I’ll make it up to you, Mia. I promise. I’ll bring you an extra special gift when I finally get there.”*

“And you’ll definitely make it before Christmas?” I press, my stomach knotting as I think about waiting longer to tell him about the baby.

“Promise,” he guarantees.

That brings a smile to my face, though I know he’s in no position to say that kind of thing. He can’t control the weather, after all. “I have a surprise for you,” I say, excitement bubbling up in me as I think about my holiday cookie business idea. But I don’t want to tell him about it over the phone. I want to see the look on his face when I give him my pitch in person.

“You do? That’s funny. I have a surprise for you too,” he teases, a mischievous note in his voice.

My grin widens as I picture that devilish glint in his eye that he always gets right before he gives me something he knows I’m going to enjoy. “Really? What is it?”

He laughs. *“You’ll just have to wait and see, sweetheart. But I think you’re going to like this one.”*

Something about the way he says it makes my heart flutter uncomfortably. And though I usually love my dad’s surprises, I suddenly don’t know that I can trust that I’ll want this one he

has for me. Then again, that might just be me projecting because I'm definitely not confident he's going to like the surprise I spring on him about my having a baby.

The knot tightens around my chest once more as my brief respite from my situation comes to a close. I really need to figure out what I'm going to do about Zach, Luke, and Cilian. I'm just terrified I'm going to make the wrong call. Now more than ever.

Daddy and I exchange a few more pleasantries before we hang up.

Only then does the reality sink in of having to host my father's Christmas retreat for another night. I sigh heavily, closing my eyes as I suddenly feel bone-weary. Perhaps I should take a nap. But the clock on the wall ticks away, keeping my mind just on this side of awake.

I don't think I'd be able to sleep even if I tried. Still, I don't know what I'm going to do with myself for the next several hours. The party won't start until later in the afternoon. A fleeting thought crosses my mind of sneaking out for a spa day to ease my stress. And suddenly, that sounds like an immensely good idea.

I decide to treat myself, a temporary escape from the weight of decisions looming over me. I sit up with renewed energy. From my closet, I snag a matching crimson scarf, hat, and glove set that will work perfectly with my winter jacket.

With a fortifying breath, I open the door to my room, ready to head out into the winter wonderland that has become the mountain town of Aspen. To my delight, the house is fairly quiet. People must have gone skiing or on a stroll through town, so I make it to the entryway without running into anybody.

Grabbing my plaid pea coat from the front closet, I slip my arms into it and button up, knotting the belt around my waist for good measure.

"Sneaking off, are we?"

Luke's deep Southern drawl makes my heart skip a beat, and I turn to find him standing in the doorway, watching me.

"I would never!" I object playfully, my smile stretching across my face as I find I'm happy to see him—even if he is one of the decisions I'm avoiding.

"Who said anything about *you* sneaking off?" he teases, striding across the entryway to collect his coat from the closet as well. "I distinctly recall saying *we*."

Heat climbs up my neck to pool in my cheeks as I realize my spa day has just been ambushed. "Oh, *we're* going somewhere?" I ask, enjoying the banter despite myself.

"Only if you'll let me." His voice turns serious, his blue eyes probing as he turns to face me fully.

And the sincerity of his unspoken question steals my breath away. He's giving me a choice, a real choice. And if I want to be alone, he'll let me. But I see the glimmer of hope behind his patient gaze, and I can't bring myself to turn him down when he so clearly wants to spend some time with me.

After everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, I at least owe him that.

"Company sounds great," I say, slipping my hand through the crook of his elbow and turning to face the front door.

From the corner of my eye, I catch Luke's smile, and it positively melts me like a snowball in May.

LUKE

The crisp winter air nips at my nose as Mia and I step out of the warm house, the scents of pine and snow hanging in the air. The car idles in the driveway, a sleek black vehicle that promises adventure. I glance at Mia, her eyes bright with curiosity and a touch of hesitation. I clear my throat, suddenly aware of the fact that I have Mia all to myself.

“Anywhere in particular you were heading, or are you up for a little impromptu adventure?” I ask, my voice casual but my heart pounding with anticipation.

Mia grins, a spark of mischief in her eyes. “I’m up for anything. Lead the way.”

I open the car door for her, letting her slip inside first, and when she slides across the bench to the far seat, I follow her in and shut the door. Mia rubs her glove-clad palms together, warding off the cold as the car’s heater surrounds us with warmth.

“Where to?” Mia’s driver asks, his eyes looking at us from the rearview mirror.

I give him the address rather than the name of the business, hoping to prolong Mia’s anticipation a little longer.

I know that Zach spent time with Mia in her room this morning. And I don’t particularly want to think about the details of what they were doing in there together. Frankly, I don’t know that it’s my business—even if I had half a mind to interrupt them. Somehow, I managed to find the self-restraint to leave them be, mostly because I don’t want to just be riding

Zach's coattails, disrupting whatever it is they have rather than proving that I'm the right man for her.

I have to accept the fact that, for whatever reason, Mia went to Zach first about being the father of her child. So, rather than trying to prove her wrong for approaching him, I intend to take her on an adventure around Aspen to show her I'm not just the work-driven man Zach is probably making me out to be.

In truth, I've been slowing down a lot this past year. I started thinking more about life beyond work once I turned forty, and I've been happy with my choice to focus more on my relationships—both friends and family. I've even been thinking about starting a family of my own. So, to have Mia—a dream girl in any straight man's book—turn up pregnant after our steamy night together on Halloween? I could almost consider it a sign.

Not that I think she looks at me in the same way.

I'm one of three potential men she could see raising this child with her. So now I need to show her why I'm the best man for the job.

The car glides through the winding roads of Aspen, the towering snow-covered trees creating a magical winter wonderland around us. The silence between us is comfortable, filled only with the soft hum of the engine and the occasional crunch of snow beneath the tires.

We arrive just outside of town, and the car comes to a stop. I open the door for Mia, and we step out into the chilly air once more. Before us looms a barn, and standing before its sliding doors is a horse-drawn sleigh adorned with twinkling lights.

Mia's eyes widen with surprise and delight. "Luke, is this ___"

"A sleigh ride through the snowy forest, complete with a picnic. What do you say?" I finish her sentence, a grin playing on my lips.

She nods eagerly, and I help her climb into the sleigh, my hand resting beneath her gloved palm as I guide her up. Then I follow her, snuggling beneath the warm blankets provided as an excuse to get close.

The jingle of the bells on the horse's harness spring to life as we venture into the heart of the winter landscape, and Mia watches the world slide slowly past us as she huddles close to my side, my arm around her shoulders.

The snow-laden branches form a canopy overhead, casting a soft glow over everything. I steal a glance at Mia, her cheeks rosy from the cold, and a warmth spreads through me. This is the side of life I want to share with her, away from the hustle of work and the chaos of the city.

The sleigh comes to a gentle stop in a clearing, and I help Mia down.

"Luke, this is so sweet," she gushes as her eyes land on the picnic laid out just for us.

A thick checkered blanket is spread on the pristine snow, adorned with a spread of delectable treats. I motion for her to take a seat, and I join her.

"Overall, it looks more savory to me," I joke, pointing to the cheese and cured meats laid out before us.

Mia giggles, the sound music to my soul, and our laughter blends with the crisp mountain air.

"So, how has it been, figuring life out after college?" I ask, waiting for her to take her first choice in cheese before I follow suit.

"Honestly? A mess. Daddy keeps pressing me to take a job at the company 'until I know what I want to do with my life', but we both know he just wishes I would take over his shares when he retires." Mia's tone borders on bitter, but I know the constant struggle between her and Mike.

He just wants what's best for her. She just wants to make her own decisions in life.

“I...” Her sentence dies on her lips as she glances at me, then her eyes fall back to the picnic before us.

“What?” I urge gently, leaning closer until our hands meet on the blanket.

“Sometimes, I think he’s right. I’m too impulsive and don’t think about the consequences. I mean, look at me. Pregnant at twenty-three with no clue which of you three is the father. Daddy’s going to be furious, and I won’t blame him.” Mia nibbles on her slice of cheese, falling silent.

“You know, he and your mother weren’t married when she got pregnant the first time,” I say, watching Mia closely. I don’t know if her parents have ever told her that part of their history. It always seemed like Karen and Mike found it too painful to talk about—even to me.

“I’m sorry. What?” Mia turns her full attention to me now, her hand lowering from her mouth as her lips remain slightly agape.

“Yeah. Your mom found out she was pregnant about three months into their dating, and when she told your father, he proposed to her on the spot. I don’t know that anything else would have driven him to put so much into that relationship. He’s always been a workaholic.”

Mia snorts. “Don’t I know it. But then... what happened?” she asks, her tone hesitant, like she’s not sure she wants to know.

“They had something of a shotgun wedding.”

“Which you officiated,” she says, a smile spreading across her lush lips.

I laugh. “Which I officiated,” I confirm. “Nice to know they managed to fit that detail into the story.”

Mia leans closer, her arm brushing against mine as she gives me her undivided attention.

“They lost the child very late in the pregnancy—too late, really. It nearly destroyed them. Your father turned to his work for solace, trying to forget his grief by working himself

ragged. Your mom, on the other hand, man, she rose above her sadness like an avenging angel. And she told him she would have a child—with or without him.”

A sad smile spreads across Mia’s face now, and the tip of her nose pinkens as her eyes start to shine with emotion. “That sounds like Mom,” she breathes.

“You were born a year and a half later, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen prouder parents.”

Mia shakes her head, her face baffled. “I’ve never heard them tell the story that way. I never thought... well, I guess I always assumed my mom wanted kids and my dad compromised with giving her me.”

“I assure you, they both want you. They wanted you more than the sun and the moon combined. But I don’t know that your dad ever fully recovered from the grief of that first loss. I think he never discovered how to pull himself out of the sanctuary of his work. It’s his safe space, where he knows he can reside without feeling too much of anything. You know? But he loves you, Mia. More than you’ll ever know.”

“How do you know that?” she murmurs, her voice hitching.

“Well, because I spend more time with him than anybody. He talks about you all the time. And though I know it might not always seem like it, he would give anything to see you happy. In truth, I think part of why I love you is because I feel like I already know all the wonderful things about you.”

A tense silence stretches between us as Mia’s blue eyes search mine, their intensity like lasers cutting straight to my soul. “You love me?”

Shoot, I did say that, didn’t I?

Not that it’s untrue. I feel more strongly for Mia than I do about any woman I’ve ever been with—and we’re not really even dating. Yet. But I’ve seen the woman she’s grown into. I’ve spent enough time with her to know I love her humor, her intelligence, her vivacity. And now, I know that I’m attracted to her too. With an astounding intensity.

“Does that scare you?” I ask softly, slowly raising my hand to brush my knuckles along her fine cheekbone.

Her breath catches in her throat, her eyes dilating as her lips part. But she seems at a loss for words. Then she murmurs the single sweetest word. “No.”

My heart swells, and I lean in to capture her lips in a soft kiss, a warmth surrounding us in its cozy glow. Mia pulls back a moment later, her eyes finding mine once more.

“I feel like I know you too, Luke. Sometimes, even better than my dad. But I do wish I knew you better. I mean, I know all the big stuff like where you’re from, where you live now, and what you do for a living. But I don’t really know much about your hobbies outside of the business—or even if you’ve had a serious girlfriend before. I vaguely recall Daddy saying something about how you’ve never been married.” Her blush is adorable, and it makes me chuckle as I realize the direction we’re going.

“Ask me anything, and I’ll tell you. The afternoon is yours, and I want to spend as much of that time with you as you’re willing to give me.”

The warmth of Mia’s smile could melt away the snow, and she snuggles closer to me now, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Okay, did you have a favorite pet growing up?”

“Definitely my black lab Furby.”

Mia laughs. “Okay, there has to be a story behind a name like *that*.”

I grin. “Well, you know I have three younger sisters, right?”

Over the next hour or so, we share stories and laughter, the warmth of connection replacing the chill in the air. The sun begins its descent, casting a golden hue over the snow-covered landscape. I steal glances at Mia, captivated by the way her eyes light up when she talks about her passion for baking.

As the temperature drops, I wrap an arm around her, pulling her close. The blanket cocooning us shields us from the biting cold, and Mia leans into the embrace. The snowflakes dance around us, creating a mesmerizing scene as we sit there, lost in the magic of the moment.

“You know,” I begin, my voice low, “I’ve been thinking a lot about life beyond work. About slowing down, finding joy in the little things.”

Mia looks at me, her eyes reflecting understanding. “It’s easy to get caught up in the hustle. But moments like this, they remind you of what truly matters.”

I nod, grateful for the simplicity of the moment. The snow continues to fall, adding to the enchantment of the forest around us. Sitting there, wrapped in each other’s warmth, the snow falling around us like a silent blessing, I can’t help but feel that in the midst of snowflakes and shared glances, something magical has begun.

I lean in, my lips brushing against Mia’s, a gentle yet electrifying connection passing between us. Time seems to stand still as we kiss beneath the winter sky. It’s a kiss that speaks of shared laughter, quiet understanding, and the promise of something more. When we pull away, a soft smile plays on Mia’s lips, and I can’t help but return it.

MIA

I can't explain my feelings for any of the three men who have come suddenly into my life like presents under the tree. Each time I'm with one, he feels like the right one for me. The chemistry and playful energy between me and Cilian is out of this world. My magnetic connection to Zach seems to grow stronger, more authentic and meaningful every time I'm with him. And yet, when I'm with Luke, it feels like home.

It ought to seem strange, since I grew up thinking of him as my father's business partner and closest friend. But maybe that's why we fit so naturally. Because he knows me. He watched me grow up, and he cares for the woman I am, not just the sex I can offer.

I know that because in all the years I've known Luke, he has never failed to be there for me, playing whatever role I might need at the time—mentor, cheerleader, knight in shining armor, even clown. He's filled in the spaces of my heart when Daddy didn't know how.

And he's done it without effort.

He's done it selflessly.

But now that we've crossed the line into something more intimate, I can't believe how intense the attraction is between us.

Luke has always been the handsome Southern gentleman, but he truly knows how to treat me right. And when he kisses me, I can feel the way he'll cherish me from now until the day he dies.

Though I know it's wrong to keep going further down this path when I should first make up my mind, I can't seem to stop myself. Having Luke's lips gently pressed to mine fills me with a value and confidence that wipe all other thoughts from my mind.

Combing my fingers into his silver hair, I lean against his muscular chest, relishing the way his body heat radiates through my jacket and flannel shirt and into my skin. Slowly, we sink back onto the checkered blanket, my back meeting the cold ground as he hovers over me, his strong arms enveloping me as he holds me close.

The blanket he wrapped around our shoulders earlier now envelopes us in a cozy cocoon, creating our own little sleeping bag of warmth out in the woods. And amid the beauty and the nature, I feel as though I've been swept into a fairy tale, my cowboy prince kissing me with a scintillating sweetness.

"God, I want to make love to you," Luke breathes against my lips.

And his words make my heart flutter.

No one's ever said that to me before, and I can scarcely breathe around the emotion those words evoke. Not playful, steamy sex. Not hot, rough fucking. He wants to make love.

And I want him to make love to me.

Him. Luke.

Because there's not a shadow of doubt in my mind that he will do it exactly the way it's supposed to be done. Tenderly, and filled with a passion that can't be outdone by the lust-driven activity of two people who aren't in love.

"Okay," I breathe, my heart hammering against my ribs as I agree.

Luke peers deep into my eyes, the emotion in his gaze stealing my breath away. Then his lips find mine in a passionate kiss. His fingers find the button of my jeans and flick it open, slowly dragging the zipper down.

I hook my thumbs into the waist of my pants and undies, shimmying out of both at the same time as Luke keeps the blanket wrapped firmly around us. Then I go to work on his jeans, popping the button and unzipping them.

I push them down over his hips with no small amount of effort, and as soon as I feel the hard length of his cock spring free, my belly coils with anticipation.

“I’ve never done this before,” I confess, my nerves getting the better of me as they loosen my tongue.

“Never done what?” Luke breathes against the soft flesh of my throat as he trails soft kisses from my ear to my collarbone.

“Made love.”

Drawing back, Luke meets my gaze with his deep sapphire-blue one, and I swallow nervously as my stomach starts to quiver. It’s ridiculous, I know. I’ve had plenty of sex in my life. I’ve even had a foursome that included this very man. But somehow, this feels entirely different, far more meaningful than what’s come before.

Because as we lie here, in the Aspen snow, I find I’m finally ready to actually *give* someone my heart. Maybe it’s because I’m twenty-three years old and out of college now. Maybe it’s because of the innocent life growing in my belly. Maybe it’s because of the story Luke told me today—a story about myself and how truly loved I am.

I don’t know. But suddenly, I feel ready.

As if reading my very thoughts, a soft smile spreads across Luke’s masculine face. “I’ll be gentle,” he promises.

And my heart positively melts.

As his silken cockhead finds my slick entrance, I’ve never felt so excited. He presses inside me so slowly, I can scarcely stand it. All the while, his eyes hold mine, the emotion in them penetrating me as deeply as his impressive erection.

A gasp rushes between my lips as liquid warmth floods my body, filling me with a joy I never knew could come from sex. It feels so good, I want to let my eyes roll into the back of my

head. But I can't seem to break away from Luke's captivating gaze.

The intensity of the moment overwhelms me, and tears sting the backs of my eyes as I realize that this is truly what it feels like to be loved by a man, this deep connection and utter sense of safety.

I could be anything. I could do anything, and I know Luke would love me.

Lifting my head up off the ground, I kiss him, combing my fingers into his hair to lock our lips together as he eases in and out of me at a tantalizing pace. I can feel every inch of him, filling me up, making me whole, and then withdrawing to leave me agonizingly hollow.

It's slow, soft, and sensual, entirely different from the other times I've been with him or Zach or Cilian—or all three. And I love that we're exploring this new, emotionally charged passion together. I love that it's Luke who's showing me what making love is really about.

I'm not sure that anyone else in the world could do it quite like him.

And now that I've had a taste of it, I never want to give this up.

Not that I want to give up any of the other spicy, fun experiences either. When it comes down to it, I love sex. But I don't know that a single other sensation feels better than making love.

He hasn't penetrated me more than five or six times, and already, I'm edging toward climax, my nerves vibrating through my body like a live wire. My breaths come fast and hard as my muscles bunch and flex, moving with his body as if we were one.

"You feel so good," I breathe, my voice unable to climb above a whisper.

And Luke groans, the deeply sexual sound blasting through my core like a grenade. I gasp as my walls tighten,

clamping down on him in anticipation of the orgasm that is moments away.

“Come with me, Luke,” I plead, my lips brushing the lobe of his ear as I cling to him desperately, every inch of me trembling with unbridled desire.

“*Fuck, Mia,*” he groans, his hips jerking forward.

And I can feel it. That moment we both topple over the edge. My head falls back onto the soft snow, my lips parting in a silent cry as I come explosively. At the same time, Luke swells inside me, his cock releasing a powerful burst of cum.

And my pussy breaks into a sprint, spasming around him like my life depends on it. I pant with the force of my orgasm as tingling euphoria ripples out to my fingers and toes, curling them involuntarily.

Hips thrusting erratically, Luke pours hot seed deep inside me. Then we collapse together onto the cold ground.

“Christ, Mia. I think that’s the best sex I’ve ever had,” he rasps, his voice ragged with leftover arousal.

Still panting, my body numb with euphoria, all I can manage is a nod. My eyes lazily sink closed as Luke presses a soft kiss to my lips. Then he eases out of me to pull his pants back up.

I do the same, silently grateful for the tent of warmth he offers me beneath the blanket as I do so. And only after he pulls me back into his strong arms do I fully take in the world around me once more.

“Is it sunset?” I ask, astonished to find the lighting far dimmer than before.

Luke lifts his wrist to look at his watch. “Appears so. I need to get you back, don’t I?”

“I’m supposed to be ready to host cocktail hour.” I bite my lip, sorry that our date has to come to such an abrupt end.

“Well, then, let’s get a move on.” Brushing a quick kiss across my lips, Luke comes to a stand. Then he pulls me to my feet.

We're back in the sleigh in record time, the horse jingling as it races back through the snow, taking us home to its barn and leaving behind our winter wonderland.

CILIAN

The halls of the estate stretch out before me, opulent and silent. My eyes scan each room with a growing frustration. Mia wasn't in her room last night, and her absence lingers like an unspoken question in the air. Did she choose not to be there because she knew we had a deal? Or did something happen?

Our time together before the cocktail party yesterday had been hot, passionate. And I was more than eager to continue exploring it after the party calmed down last night. But she didn't reappear after our conversation on the patio, and when I went to her room, she was nowhere to be found.

I haven't seen her all day, either.

The day unfolds with an odd emptiness. Mia's laughter, her spirited conversations, everything that defines the rhythm of the mountainous retreat is conspicuously absent. Something has shifted, and a sense of uncertainty hangs in the air.

It's not until the day is waning, the sun dipping low on the horizon, casting long shadows over the estate, that I spot them. Mia and Luke, arm in arm, entering through the manor's front door with an ease that sends a jolt through me.

I know he and Zach were hovering around her yesterday, their glances betraying their keen interest in her, which seems to have awakened since Halloween—like mine. But I hadn't actually considered them competition. Until now.

I quicken my steps, closing the distance between us, but hesitate in the shadows. Mia's laughter, once so familiar and

cherished, now stings like a bitter reminder of betrayal. My easy charm and privileged position, which have always captured her attention, suddenly feel inadequate.

I know the way she looks at me. I've seen that look enough times to realize the girl has had a crush on me for years now. And at first, I thought it was sweet, something fun to flirt with but never cross the line.

Until Halloween. Now, everything has changed, and despite myself, despite my friendship with her father, I can't seem to stop the magnetic pull that effortlessly draws me closer to her.

Luke leans in to whisper something in Mia's ear, a gesture that reeks of intimacy, and a surge of possessiveness grips me. The doubt that has slumbered in my mind stirs and awakens, a beast ready to pounce.

I can't lose her. Not to Luke or Zach, who circle her like predators. Mia is mine, by right, by entitlement, by the unspoken rules of our social hierarchy. And I won't just stand idly by as one slips in during my absence. I've been too complacent, but no more.

If I want to stay in this competition, I need to show Mia that I care—about more than the physical stuff. Because as insanely hot as our connection is, that's not what's captivated me about Mia. That might be what got my attention, but our conversation last night has me hooked in a way I've never been before. And I want to know more. I want to learn everything about Mia.

It's a new desire, I'll admit, but I've lived long enough to know when something truly matters, and my feelings for Mia are stronger than anything I've ever felt before.

Luke steps back, offering to take Mia's coat, and she slides out of it with a grateful smile over her shoulder. The slick git. He's good, smooth, practiced. I'm sure he's winning her over with his Southern charm.

I need to get my act together if I want a prayer of taking Mia home with me. Because more and more, I'm realizing

that's what I want. Something beyond the chase. More than a one-night stand.

Or in our case, a one-night foursome followed by an insanely hot reunion before the party began. But if I'm going to catch Mia's eye now, I can't play it safe with any half-gestures or casual flirtation.

Luke has a leg up on me in one regard—he knows Mia far better already.

So, if I intend to win the girl, I'll need to make a sure statement that lays claim to her.

The silent auction comes to me in a moment of genius, and a decision crystallizes in my mind. I can't be passive any longer. Tearing my eyes from the far-too-friendly scene before me, I stride purposefully to the den, where the silent auction table stands with twelve separate sheets of paper resting beneath twelve opulent representations of the prizes up for grabs.

Only one thing matters—the chance to dance with Mia at the Christmas Eve ball. I approach the small porcelain figurine of two dancers arm in arm and scan down the paper I've already placed several bids on. The bids have been fierce, fortunes exchanged for nine fleeting moments in Mia's arms. And while Luke, Zach, and I are clearly the most determined to dance with her, I'm surprised to find just how many men would pay a pretty penny for the honor of holding her in their arms.

My gaze locks onto the empty last square of the bid sheet, and with determination, I scribble an astronomical figure that would leave even the wealthiest patrons gasping. I *will* win this round. And with the silent auction about to close, I'm confident I'll be the last man standing.

But it's not just about winning the chance to dance with Mia. It's about showing her how much I would give to have her. And this will remove any doubt in her mind.

I step back, heart pounding, and unleash a victorious smile. Then, with a nod to the man overseeing the bidding, I slip

from the room, heading back to my suite to get ready for cocktail hour.

MIA

Luke and I part ways so I can head upstairs to get ready for cocktail hour. We're back with just enough time to spare. Skipping up the steps, I round the corner into the hallway of my room and come face to face with Lindsey.

"Oh, sorry about that!" I exclaim, steadying myself moments before we actually collide.

Lindsey, her eyes sparkling with excitement, grins and brushes a strand of her dark hair behind her ear. "No problem at all. I was just heading back to my room to get ready for the party. But I can't find the dress Dad said he packed for me for tonight. I was going to try and hunt him down to ask him."

"Oh, well, would you like to borrow one of mine? I'm sure I must have something stashed away that would fit you," I reply, my gaze drifting down the hall toward my room. "Actually, I was just about to get ready too. Want to join me? We can do our hair and makeup together."

Lindsey's face lights up with enthusiasm. "That sounds like so much fun! I'd love to."

It's the most enthusiasm I've seen from the girl since she arrived, and it warms my heart to think she and I have made a genuine connection. I know I like her. She's smart and witty, with an impressive understanding of sarcasm for someone her age. Just my kind of girl.

Once inside my room, I gesture toward the mirror and the assortment of makeup scattered across my vanity. "Help

yourself,” I say, pulling out my own makeup bag. “What’s your go-to look for parties?”

Lindsey’s eyes widen with excitement as she surveys the array of eyeshadows and lipsticks. “I’ve honestly never done this before,” she confesses, her expression giddy. “Can I try one of each?”

I laugh, an image of her decked out like a clown filling my head. I’m confident that’s what I looked like the first time I tried to do my own makeup. Thankfully, I have a mom who helped set me straight.

“When it comes to makeup, I often find that less is more. Why don’t we do yours together? Then you can get a feel for how much to use. I promise, you can go from *Princess Diaries* to Ronald McDonald with shockingly little effort.”

Lindsey laughs. “In that case, I’ll take all the pointers I can get.”

“Why don’t you pick out two or three colors you like? Then I’ll show you the general concept of how to apply it while I do mine. After, we can do yours.”

I meet her eyes in the mirror, and she gives me a broad grin.

“Sounds great.”

As we chat about makeup and share beauty tips, the atmosphere in the room becomes charged with the anticipation of the evening ahead. While I stick to my more classic natural colors, giving my eyelids a light shimmer and painting a thin cat-eye to darken my lashes, Lindsey tries a daring combination of blue and purple eyeshadows that surprisingly compliments her eyes perfectly. I apply the color with care, then decide to add a touch of mascara to complete the look.

Hair is easier, as Lindsey seems to have a good idea of the braid she wants to put hers in. I curl mine, pinning it up in a complicated knot on top of my head, leaving a few curls to cascade around my face and the nape of my neck.

Then it’s time to get dressed. Heading to the back of my closet, I dig through some of the smaller dresses I haven’t

worn in years. Tucked toward the back is a crimson dress with a black floral overlay. The belt is a distinct band around the waist, and the red fabric ends at the neckline, leaving the black lace to create a sheer long sleeve.

“What about this?” I suggest, walking it out of the closet to show my protégé.

“I love it,” Lindsey gasps.

“Try it on.” I toss it to her with a smile then head back into the closet to look for my own outfit while I give her some privacy to change.

For myself, I snag an emerald A-line, sweetheart, sleeveless dress with a knee-length tulle skirt and a ribbed corset top. Glitter shimmers throughout the light fabric, and the cups that cover my breasts are beaded intricately to give the dress a fun, flirty, and festive look. It screams Christmas, and with a pair of nude scalloped-edge pumps, I know it will be an eye-catcher.

“Ready for me to come out?” I ask.

“Yep!”

Lindsey stands proudly in her dress, her modest black heels a perfect finish to the beautiful ensemble that makes her look sophisticated and charming.

“That fits you perfectly!” I gush, a smile splitting my face.

“I love it,” she admits, giving me a spin, and the girly movement wipes away all the teenage angst she carries with her.

“Well, then, it’s yours,” I say. “You might find a few more occasions to wear it before it’s too small. I, on the other hand, won’t be able to fit in it again.”

“Your dress is gorgeous,” Lindsey says, her eyes wide with admiration.

Before I have time to respond, a knock comes at the door, and Lindsey strides to open it.

“I hope you don’t mind. I told Dad we were getting ready together.”

“Oh, perfect.”

She pulls the door open to reveal Zach standing there with a charming smile.

“Hey, ladies! Ready to light up the party?” he asks.

Lindsey beams, giving him a twirl as well to showcase her festive look. “Absolutely! Mia’s got all the beauty secrets. I’m feeling like a glam queen!”

Zach chuckles, his eyes shifting to mine as he mouths a silent *thank-you*. “Well, you both look fantastic. I’m here to offer my escort services to the grand event. Shall we?”

“Let’s do this,” I agree, striding across the room to join them.

The opulent living room buzzes with the low hum of chatter and clinking glasses as cocktail hour unfolds, the air heavy with the fragrance of expensive perfumes and the tantalizing aroma of festive beverages. The white-trimmed tree casts a warm glow over the room, accentuating the elegant decor and the well-dressed attendees. For the second night in a row, I find myself playing host during cocktail hour and then into dinner, navigating the social intricacies of Daddy’s friends.

But tonight, I find it far less overwhelming.

Luke, with his disarming smile and easy charm, has effortlessly engaged a group of guests in conversation near the bar. Cilian, tall and mysterious, stands by the grand piano, sharing a laugh with a group of elegantly dressed women. And Zach spends quality time with his daughter, seeming over the moon by the fact that Lindsey’s proving happy to be here.

I weave through the sea of people, exchanging pleasantries and ensuring that everyone feels welcomed. And though I get a few questions asking for an update on Daddy’s travel plans, it seems that the guests have all had a relaxing enough day that they’re at ease with the festive atmosphere.

As the night progresses, it becomes clear that each of the men vying for my attention has found a comfortable way to share my time. Cilian teases me playfully, Zach offers enigmatic compliments, and Luke engages me in witty banter, but none seem to need me all to themselves.

And I wonder if the time I've spent with them individually over the past twenty-four hours has somehow solidified our relationships, so now, I can truly enjoy what each of them has to offer. It's a delicate dance, and I find myself appreciating their efforts to make the evening enjoyable for me, regardless of the reason behind it.

The time comes for the conclusion of the silent auction, the event that will kick off the Christmas Eve ball, and my stomach has butterflies as I think about how I'll have to be dancing with someone shortly, performing for all to see.

I take the stage, the spotlight turning my emerald-green gown into a shimmering display. The anticipation in the room is palpable as I welcome them all once again to my father's holiday retreat, assuring them that he will be joining us as soon as the weather permits. Then I turn my attention to the auction.

"As is tradition, I'll read the items, not in the order of the twelve days of Christmas, but from lowest to highest final bid. That way, we give our highest bidder and most generous donor the recognition they deserve!" I announce, to raucous applause.

Then I glance down at the results. Surprise registers as I realize I'm not the lowest-bid item on the list. A slight disappointment makes my stomach sink—it would have been nice to get that announcement out of the way. Oh, well. I begin to read off the winners of each decadent prize, announcing the charities their generosity will support.

"First, we have the year's supply of fruit from Partridge and Wren," I say, scanning the crowd for the winning bid. "And the winner is... Mrs. Eleanor Thompson! Congratulations, and thank you for supporting the National Alliance to End Homelessness."

Applause fills the room as the prizes and charities are announced one by one. The atmosphere is electric, each bid contributing to a worthy cause. The generosity of the attendees warms my heart, and I can't help but feel a sense of pride for my father's charitable event.

The sums behind the bids this year are quite impressive, and as we near the end of the list, I try to hide my frown as my confusion mounts. *Did the staff decide to leave my dance off the list entirely because no one bid on it at all?* That would be a first. And a massive relief.

But as I approach the final item on the list, the spotlight seems to intensify, raising a bead of sweat on my brow as I realize it's me. My dance received the highest bid. My eyes widen as I read the amount, my voice catching for a moment.

"And now, for the last item of the evening, *nine* special dances with yours truly," I announce with a practiced mile, though my heart races, "The winning bid is... an astonishing one hundred thousand dollars!"

Gasps ripple through the crowd as they process the hefty sum. I glance at the bid sheet again, my astonishment growing as I see the name next to the amount. Cilian.

"Cilian O'Conner," I say, my voice breathy with shock. "Thank you for your generous bid, and congratulations. Your contribution will be going to the Save the Children Foundation."

The room erupts in applause, but my attention is solely on Cilian. He stands, a slight smile playing on his lips, and makes his way toward the stage. The intensity of his gaze sends a shiver down my spine, and I can't help but blush as he reaches the platform.

ZACHARY

The ballroom is alive with the soft hum of laughter and the elegant rustle of gowns as the much-anticipated Christmas Eve ball begins. I stand on the outskirts, watching Mia in her festive green dress as she gracefully descends the stage steps, her hand lightly clasping Cilian's.

It could be a scene straight out of a fairy tale as he guides her carefully down, holding one arm behind his back in a gentlemanly pose. But the bitter taste of disappointment lingers in my mouth. It was like a punch in the gut to hear that Cilian will be dancing with Mia. I can't believe he managed to sneak in and outbid me.

Luke sidles up beside me in his finest suit, his blue tie accentuating the silver in his hair and the color of his eyes. He's a sharp dresser, I have to admit. Though I'm not so bad myself in a black suit and tie to match the formal occasion.

My eyes shift back to the couple at the center of the crowd's attention, following Mia's movements as her long legs call attention to themselves beneath her flirty tulle skirt.

"Can you believe this?" Luke mutters, his voice edged with disbelief as they make their way onto the dance floor.

I shake my head, my jaw clenched. "I had it all planned. I watched and waited to make sure I placed the final bid. Cilian must have swooped in and stolen the dance right as the auction was closing. Unbelievable. And what's with the exorbitant amount when he knew he would be the last bid? I mean, yes, it goes to a good cause, and Mia's definitely worth every penny.

But a hundred thousand dollars? Really? What's he trying to prove?"

Luke's eyes follow the couple across the room as they pause in the center of the dance floor alone, Cinderella and Prince Charming at the ball. The disdain on his face mirrors my own. "It doesn't matter who Mia picks as long as it's not Cilian," he says, his tone firm. "And from the looks of it, I think we're going to have to help her along in that regard. Maybe she doesn't realize that he won't take this seriously. He's charming enough, and I wouldn't put it past him to convince her of that. But he's never going to settle down, never going to care enough for one woman to deserve Mia. I suspect he's only doing this now because he doesn't like to lose. He's probably just in it for the W and thought he could have Mia without even trying. But after today, he realized it wasn't going to be as easy as he thought it would. Not after he saw me coming home with Mia this afternoon."

I cast a sharp glance in Luke's direction, my curiosity piqued as to what he and Mia were up to. But I don't ask. Instead, I give a curt nod of agreement, trying to ignore the slight grin that curves the edge of his lips, alerting me to the fact that it must have been a very good day. "And if we can agree on anything, it's that Mia and her child deserve the world."

Luke nods, his expression growing serious once again.

We stand there, united in our silent disapproval, our eyes fixed on Cilian as the first notes of a slow, enchanting melody fill the ballroom and he takes Mia in a proper ballroom hold. The music swells, the atmosphere charged with tension as Mia and Cilian start to circle the dance floor. Their movements are graceful, Mia's posture elegant as she follows Cilian in a flawless waltz. Even I have to admit they look striking together.

If I didn't know better, I could almost believe it was planned, Mia in her emerald-green dress and Cilian in his crimson velvet blazer. They're like Christmas in a cup as they twirl around the dance floor. The song comes to a close, and the room applauds heartily, celebrating the beautiful waltz.

Then the next tune begins, and other couples join them on the floor as Cilian takes his second dance.

“You think we should do something?” Luke suggests, his gaze never leaving the Irish playboy.

I glance at him, surprised by the rare alignment of our thoughts. “Normally, I’m of the opinion that I should butt out and let things take their natural course. Mia’s smart and can make up her own mind. But in this? Yeah, we should. We can’t let Cilian ruin her life. She doesn’t need that right now, when she’s already stressed. And we both know he’s perfectly capable of throwing a wrench in people’s best-laid plans.”

The number of married women he’s slept with and marriages he’s broken up is enough to confirm that fact. He gets something in his sights, and he goes for it. No matter the consequences.

Only this time, I suspect he doesn’t realize just how big those consequences might be. When I spoke to Mia yesterday, she still hadn’t told Cilian about the baby. And I suspect that’s because, deep down, she knows the same thing Luke and I do. Cilian is not ready to be a father.

Luke and I move farther from the dance floor, finding a quiet corner where we can strategize away from prying ears.

“We should wait until Cilian’s dances are over,” he says, leaning in to keep our conversation private. “Otherwise, it’ll be too obvious—and would likely gain Mia’s disapproval—if we cut in before she’s fulfilled her obligations for the silent auction. But after that, we make our move. She won’t be stuck with him for a minute longer than necessary.”

I nod in agreement, impressed by the rare display of cooperation between us—considering we’re both vying for the same girl’s affections. But I think we can both agree that Mia’s heart is what’s most important to protect here—and her unborn child.

And if that means collaborating with the enemy to ensure Cilian doesn’t win, so be it.

Time to play a little dirty.

MIA

The grand ballroom is bathed in the soft glow of a thousand twinkling lights, the air alive with the hum of anticipation. The Christmas Eve ball is a spectacle of opulence, a dazzling display of gilded decorations and elegantly dressed guests.

Cilian and I stand at the center of the dance floor, my heart fluttering with a mixture of excitement and nerves as the song fades into silence. He's a phenomenal dancer, his movements fluid, his ability to lead masterful.

The anxiety over making a fool of myself faded quickly after I realized he knows exactly what he's doing and how to make me look good. I feel safe and steady in his arms. Even when I feel utterly lost.

We stand motionless, our bodies pressed together in hold as we wait for the next song to begin, and his green eyes peer deep into mine. It feels like we're the only two people in the opulent room, surrounded by a fairy tale.

As the music swells around us, he steps forward, leading me in the next dance, and we move in time with the enchanting new melody. Amid the bodies and the swaying skirts of the other dancers, I feel a sense of freedom, as though I'm floating through a dream.

A playful smirk tugs at the corner of my lips as I follow him willingly, this time relaxing enough that I can think about more than where I need to put my feet. "You really went all

out for this dance, didn't you?" I tease. "You could have bought a decent sports car with the money you bid on me."

He chuckles as he sweeps me across the floor, his movements smooth, his hold firm yet gentle. He leads with a confidence that comes from knowing he's earned this moment. "I t'ink my bid went to a better cause. I have enough sports cars as it is. Besides, yer worth every penny," he says with a wink. "And yer a hard person to get time with otherwise, Mia Florence. I don't mind shellin' out some money ta be in yer company fer a little while."

His words catch me off guard, and I can't help but laugh. "Well, I appreciate the effort. But aren't you worried about buyer's remorse? I'd have thought after our conversation last night that you would know better. I make a terrible dance partner."

He spins me gracefully, his eyes never leaving mine. "Not from where I stand," he murmurs, pulling me close.

My breath catches in my lungs at the way he looks at me, the heat in his eyes making my stomach quiver.

"Some t'ings are worth the price, and dancing with ye is one of 'em."

Flattered by his compliment, I can't help but smile, warmth pooling in my cheeks. His playful energy is infectious, and I find myself drawn in by his easy flirtation. As we dance, I can't help but steal glances at his face, trying to read the emotions behind his charming façade. It's a strange feeling, being auctioned off for a dance, but in this moment with Cilian, it feels oddly magical.

The dancing continues with a new song, and he guides me into a graceful twirl, his hands telling me exactly what he wants, his arms steadying me before I have a chance to lose my balance. Then he pulls me close once again.

"So, tell me," I tease. "This extravagant bid of yours, is that your best attempt to win my heart? Through financial means? Did you not realize that money can't buy my love?"

He shrugs, a lopsided grin on his face. “Hey, when it comes ta matters of th’ heart, sometimes ye have to pull out all th’ stops. Besides, I’m not just here fer the dance. I’m here fer the chance to get to know ye better. Last night... well, let’s just say that aside from finding you breathtakingly beautiful, I must confess yer mind and spirit have captivated me. I like ye, Mia. More than I would like to admit.”

His sincerity catches me off guard. I expected the evening to be filled with his charming wit and plenty of flirtatious banter, but Cilian seems genuinely interested in me. The realization tugs at my heart, and for a moment, I almost forget about the two other men who have occupied my thoughts all day—Luke and Zach.

The music reaches its crescendo, and Cilian dips me low. As he pulls me back up, I can’t help but feel a sense of exhilaration. The ballroom fades away, and for that moment, it’s just Cilian and me, swept up in the magic of the dance.

“So, where did ye slip off to last night when ye abandoned me out on the balcony, leavin’ me to fend for meself against the bitter cold?” he teases, his eyes glinting playfully.

“I—” I laugh, suddenly realizing the man who inspired me so completely has no clue what I was up to. “I was baking,” I confess. “Our talk made me realize that I *could* make a business out of what I love to do. And I had an idea for how I’m going to show Daddy. But since I’d hoped he might be here today, I thought I had no time to lose.”

“That’s brilliant,” he says, his smile softening as his expression fills with pride.

“Thank you. For being so... understanding. I feel like last night, hearing what you went through to find your path in life, it made me realize what’s important to me. I don’t know that I ever would have stumbled upon it without your help.”

“Of course ye would have. But if it earns me brownie points, I’ll take it. I could use all the help I can get.”

I laugh. “You make it sound like you’re worried you’re about to lose some big race,” I tease, nervously wetting my

suddenly dry lips.

“Aren’t I?” he murmurs, his look concerned and penetrating.

My heart skips a beat, and I can’t help but think about the child I have yet to tell him about. *Did he find out a different way?* No, he couldn’t have. If he knew, he would either want to talk about it or be running the other way.

I don’t know why it makes me so nervous to tell Cilian. I think it’s because out of the three of them, I’m least confident that he will be happy when he knows. And despite how hard I’m falling for Luke and Zach, part of me still hopes I might end up with Cilian. Telling him I’m pregnant might destroy that chance. Still, it’s only fair that he should know.

But I can’t do it here, now, on the dance floor. So instead, I deflect his question, turning it back on him in the hopes that he’ll let it go. “What do you mean?” I ask innocently, giving him a breathless smile.

His eyes dart to the side of the room, finding the corner where Luke and Zach stand together. My stomach drops as I find them both watching us, their eyes intent. They do not look happy.

“Ye have two other admirers who have been trying very hard to earn yer favor, I think. Meanwhile, like an absolute fool, I’ve been tryin’ ta play it cool. Have I waited too long, Mia? Have I lost me chance to earn yer heart?”

The question disarms me completely, and as my head whips to face Cilian once more, I stumble, my toe snagging on the floor. But he’s right there to catch me, smoothing over the clumsy moment with such finesse I doubt anyone would have noticed, and my heart flutters at the devastating remorse on his face.

“No,” I insist, once again torn by who I want to end up with. In truth, I’m falling for all of them. I feel like they could all be wonderful, important men in my life. As long as Cilian wants to be part of my child’s.

His face lights up at my word of encouragement, and I can feel in the way he moves me that I've restored his hope. He smiles down at me, his sandy-blond hair and freckles giving his handsome face an almost boyish charm, and though I know he's not much younger than the other two men who have stolen my heart, I feel that Cilian and I have kindred spirits—full of reckless abandon, forever young.

If I'm serious about my feelings for him, then I need to buck up my courage and tell him I'm pregnant.

As the final notes of our ninth song linger in the air, Cilian releases me with a flourish. He bows theatrically, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "Thank you for the dances, Mia. It was truly a pleasure."

The other dancers pause with us to applaud the band, then as the first notes of the next song begin, Cilian leads me off the dance floor, his hand resting lightly on the small of my back.

As we walk in silence, I gather my courage. "Cilian?" I begin, my voice a touch uncertain as we reach the edge of the dance floor.

"Yes, Mia?" he asks, his glance playful as he mimics my tone.

"Can we find somewhere to talk? Alone?"

CILIAN

“Of course.” The words pop out of my mouth before she’s even finished asking the question. It’s been challenging to get time alone with Mia, so I jump at the opportunity.

Gesturing toward the door out to the hallway, I let Mia lead the way, keeping my hand on the small of her back as the crowd parts for us. As soon as we’re in the empty hall, I capture her hand, slipping my fingers between hers.

“Let’s go, lass. I have the perfect place where no one will bother us.”

Mia giggles as I pull her down the hallway, glancing conspiratorially over my shoulder. Then I turn, pressing my back against the library door and double-checking that no one’s following before I drag her inside and close us in.

The two-story room is vast, ornate, and entirely empty, all the guests in the ballroom, preoccupied with the dance next door. But just like the other rooms of the house, this one is decorated just as splendidly. Twinkling Christmas trees furnish every window along the far wall, and colorful lights twist around the banister of the second floor.

But best of all is the mistletoe that hangs above our heads, dangling from the overhanging balcony of the second floor. Smiling wolfishly, I pull Mia close, bringing her directly beneath the holiday tradition. And when she meets my eyes, I look up at it in silent explanation.

I look down again to find her blue eyes soft and warm, her lips curving into a radiant smile.

“You planned this,” she accuses.

“Now, how could I have done that when it’s near impossible to get an audience with ye?” I tease. But in truth, I’ve had this very spot in mind since I stumbled upon it yesterday. I was just waiting for the right opportunity.

She doesn’t argue or press me further. Instead, her hand rests lightly on my chest, as if she can feel the force of my heart beating through my ribs. Then her eyes shift to my lips, a nervous anticipation in them.

Taking the cue, I lean in slowly, my arms encircling her waist as I bring our lips together. She tastes like Christmas, a blend of cinnamon, gingerbread, and chocolate that makes me groan appreciatively, and I stroke my tongue between her lips, greedy for another taste. Her lips move with mine, her tongue soft and inviting as she kisses me sweetly.

And when she finally pulls back just enough to meet my eyes again, we’re both out of breath.

“God, I want ye. Every time I’m near ye, I ’bout lose me mind.”

Mia releases a breathy laugh, her smile soft, her eyes ablaze with temptation, and I know she wants me like I want her. So I turn with her in my arms, moving her away from the door to press her back gently against the bookshelves, and I pin her there.

But as I lean in to kiss her once again, the palm resting on my chest pushes me gently. I pause, drawing back to give her a questioning look, and the sudden anxiety in her expression makes my stomach knot.

“What’s wrong?” I murmur.

“Cilian, I need to tell you something before we go any further,” she says, her voice strained.

“Okay,” I agree, concern washing through me as I feel the tension mounting in her body. Whatever it is, she’s scared to

say it, and I hate it if it's because she doesn't think she can talk to me. "Ye can tell me anything, Mia. Ye know that, right?"

"I—"

Whatever it is she wanted to say, I'll never know, because at that moment, the library door bangs open and Zach and Luke stride in, their faces set with determination. They scan the room, and when they find my arms around Mia, their expressions darken.

"Are you really considering Cilian over either of us?" Zach asks, his eyes shifting to Mia's face, his tone injured like he would find it incredibly insulting if she liked me more than him. "He's proven himself a playboy time and again, and you shouldn't be pinning such an important decision on someone so flighty."

Tension fills the air as I bristle. I've never had a problem with Luke or Zach before, but if they're actually going to try and turn Mia against me, I'm not about to just sit back and take it. My arms tighten around her protectively. "Mia has a right ta be with whoever she wants. She's a grown woman with a mind of her own."

Luke steps forward, his brows pressing into a deep frown as he cuts in. "Do you really think Cilian is ready or capable of being a responsible father?" he demands.

Mia pales visibly.

And the meaning behind Luke's statement hits me like a bag of bricks. It tells me all I need to know. Mia's pregnant, and the other two already know.

She went to them about it but not me.

It cuts surprisingly deeply to know she couldn't trust me with the knowledge or think she could rely on me—like she clearly does Luke and Zach. My arms fall numbly to my sides as a painful disappointment seeps through me.

I sensed that I was lagging behind in the battle for her heart, but I hadn't realized I wasn't even in the race. Turning to look at Mia, just trying to understand what I did to make her trust me so little, I can see it all in her gaze.

“I was going to tell you,” she whispers, tears shimmering in eyes. “I swear. Just now. That’s why I wanted to talk to you alone. I got pregnant from our night together on Halloween.”

My heart squeezes, and her blue eyes are so round and pleading that I couldn’t doubt her if I tried. Instead, it bolsters my determination. Because even if I’m the last to know, I’m confident she still has feelings for me.

“Why did ye wait?” I ask, my voice pained. “Ta tell me, I mean. Did ye not think I’d be happy?”

“I was scared you wouldn’t want anything to do with me after you found out...”

Again, like a knife to the heart, and yet I can’t blame her. I know my reputation. I’ve never voiced any plans to settle down. But that’s only because I haven’t found the right woman until now.

“Oh, love, far from it,” I assure her, stepping forward to grasp her hands. “If that’s what ye think, yer not payin’ attention to the facts. I’m crazy about ye, Mia. And a child would never get in the way of that. The way I see it, there was no point in settlin’ down with a woman if we didn’t have a deeper connection. But ye and I do. I’ve seen the way ye’ve watched me over the years. Because I’ve been watchin’ ye too. I never said anythin’ befar because I never wanted te put ye in a bad spot—sein’ as I’m friends with yer father. But things are different now. I can’t go back to keepin’ me distance. Not when *this* is how I feel about ye. And I know ye feel it too.”

Silence hangs heavily in the air as Mia snuffles, her smile brimming with joy.

“We could be a real couple,” I insist, throwing Luke and Zach a challenging glare. “And if yer bein’ honest with yerself, ye know the other two would be safety nets. So let me make ye happy, Mia. Let me raise this child with ye. Ye’d make me the happiest man in the world.”

Gently cupping the back of her neck, I pull Mia forward in a daring kiss, claiming her lips right in front of the two other men.

And for a moment, time stands still as fireworks explode from our connection.

MIA

Heat blasts through my body, setting my skin on fire as my attraction for Cilian climbs through the roof. I never dreamed he could give such a romantic speech. And though I know that Luke and Zach are more than just safety nets to me, when Cilian kisses me, it's hard to argue about our chemistry.

I can't stop myself.

I have to kiss him back.

Because his kisses consume me completely, his soft, ardent lips taking me to another world. Spellbound, I sink into the moment, melting against Cilian's chest, and his arms wrap around my waist as he holds me close.

I sense more than hear the other two boys moving beside us, and a knot forms in my stomach as I worry that they'll take this as a sign that Cilian's right, that his speech has won me over and I don't want them anymore.

But then, strong, callused fingers wrap around my wrist, gently removing my hand from Cilian's chest. And a moment later, Luke's soft lips find the tender flesh just below the heel of my palm.

I gasp against Cilian's mouth as fresh excitement fills my core, leaving tingling relief in its wake. Soft hands come to rest on my hips, and the warmth of Zach's lean chest comes up behind me. He brushes soft kisses along the line of my shoulder, melting my heart in an instant.

It seems Luke and Zach are disinclined to bow out of the race. Instead, they've come closer, as if attempting to distract me from Cilian's advances.

But I'm not ready to choose.

Far from it.

In truth, this competition between them feels like it's going to be the end of me. It will rip me apart because I can't stand the thought of letting any of them go. I love them all. Desperately.

So, rather than letting the decision break me, I come to a new determination.

I can't pick.

I'm not going to.

I want all three.

Breaking my kiss with Cilian, I try to communicate through my eyes alone just how much I want him. I lace my fingers through his, keeping him with me. Then I turn my head, tipping my chin back so Zach can kiss me.

His lips are firm and commanding, parting mine so he can stroke his tongue between my teeth. My stomach flutters at the entirely different sensation of kissing Zach, and it fills me with a fresh wave of arousal.

At the same time, Cilian leans in to kiss the exposed flesh of my chest, working his way up to my collarbone, then my neck.

A moment later, Luke's strong hand pulls me toward him, breaking my kiss with Zach and turning me to face him. His blue eyes are deep, mesmerizing pools of emotion, a passionate, loving fire that promises he's going to give me the world.

Cupping my face, he leans in and kisses me softly.

Thoughts of our picnic in the snow flash before my eyes, reminding me of the tenderness with which he made love to me not so long ago. Butterflies explode through my belly at

the memory, stoking my excitement and making me almost giddy.

Behind me, Cilian steps close, his hands coming to rest on my hips before they slowly travel down the layers of my tulle skirt to find my bare knees.

“What d’ye say, boys? Shall we give our goddess the pleasure she deserves?”

His sexy Irish lilt sends a shiver down my spine, and I kiss Luke more passionately in my sudden excitement. His lips spread in a sexy smile, the pads of his thumbs brushing the soft skin of my cheeks in approval.

“I’ll say yes,” Zach agrees, joining in by kissing his way up the inside of my arm.

Panting from the intense stimulation of having so many hands touching me, I can’t believe it actually worked. They’ve stopped fighting over me. Instead, they’re offering me a sinful pleasure I’m so intensely craving. Halloween was probably the single best night of my life, and suddenly, I’m faced with the possibility of having that again—and more.

Because this time, I can feel the emotion in their kisses, their touch.

Cilian’s fingers stroke up my thighs with tantalizing gentleness, appreciating every inch of my freshly shaved legs. And when he reaches the peak between them, I gasp at the way he pets me over my panties.

“Ye’ve gone and soaked yer lingerie, love,” he purrs in my ear.

Luke moans against my lips, and when he breaks our kiss, his eyes are filled with a ravenous need. “Christ, I want a taste.”

I glance nervously toward the library door. After what happened in the pantry, I’m not keen to repeat the mortifying experience. But I desperately want to satisfy Luke’s craving. He glances over his shoulder, following my line of sight, then he gives me a wicked smile.

“Luckily, this dress has plenty of room under it... if you’ll let me.”

At the same time as he proposes his tempting offer, Cilian pushes aside the lacy fabric covering me and his fingers press inside my entrance. I moan, my eyes glazing at the sudden and intense euphoria.

“Yes!” I gasp, not quite sure if I meant to be answering Luke.

But the devastatingly gorgeous smile he rewards me with makes it impossible to change my answer. Sinking to his knees, he dips beneath the light layers of my dress as Cilian eases his fingers out of me.

Then he guides his fingers to my lips. “Want a taste?” he urges with a sultry smile.

Leveling him with a daring smile, I lean forward to wrap my lips around his fingers and slowly suck them clean of the tangy arousal.

“Bloody Christ, woman,” he groans, his voice agonized.

I let his fingers go with a *Pop* and smile coyly.

Then Zach pinches my chin between his finger and thumb, turning my face so he can kiss me once again. I whimper as Luke’s lips find my clit at the same time, his tongue stroking between my folds.

“Mmm,” Zach breathes. “Your lips taste like your pussy,” he rasps, nearly undoing me.

Cilian reaches over my shoulder, his fingers slipping beneath the cup of my corset top to palm my breast. As I breathe heavily, he kneads the supple flesh. It’s so intensely erotic, having three men focused entirely on my pleasure. I can hardly handle the overwhelming stimulation.

At the same time, I think I might die if any one of them stopped what they’re doing. Luke’s lips and tongue tease my slit and pussy, licking up my slick juices as he pleasures me. Cilian’s sure hands play with my nipples and massage my breasts, making my core tighten deliciously. And Zach claims

my lips with a fiery passion, his tongue stroking into my mouth greedily.

It feels so agonizingly good that I know I won't be able to last. I'm going to come right here in the library, with all my father's guests just two doors away. Whimpering, I climb rapidly toward release, my breaths ripping from my lungs as I brace for the intensity.

Trembling, I feel my knees grow weak, but before I have the chance to fall, Cilian's there, his free arm wrapping around my waist to steady me. I lean heavily against his chest, overcome by the euphoria of these three sexy men meeting my every need simultaneously.

"Oh, God!" I gasp against Zach's lips, and his low hum of approval is all it takes.

I launch into a powerful orgasm, crying into his mouth as I try my best to be silent. Cilian groans near my ear, the sound agonized and arousing as a fresh wave of ecstasy washes through me, my clit spasming between Luke's lips.

Hidden beneath my skirt, he works his tongue expertly, stroking my slit and pressing gently inside my throbbing entrance. Panting, I rest my palm on top of his tulle-covered head, wishing I could see the look on his masculine face.

Zach releases my lips after the last of my shuddering aftershocks subside, his gaze ravenous as he looks me up and down. And when Luke slowly withdraws from beneath my dress, the heat in his eyes sets my body freshly ablaze.

"Shall we take this somewhere a bit more private?" Cilian suggests, his hand slipping out of my dress and leaving my breast cold and lonely in its wake.

"Yes," I pant. "Let's go back to my room."

MIA

Slipping into the hallway one by one, like teenagers trying not to get caught sneaking out of the house, we quickly make our way upstairs to my room. I giggle as Cilian pulls me along behind him, refusing to let go of my hand.

Luke leads the way, keeping an eye out for anyone who might cross our path, while Zach takes up the rear, ready to distract anyone if they should see us. I'm giddy with relief that none of the men seem to object to my desire to have all of them.

I'm relaxed after such an intense orgasm.

For the first time since I found out I was pregnant, I feel like I can stop panicking. Three wonderful, kind, sexy men have my back.

As soon as the door closes behind Zach, I kick off my heels and race to the bed, climbing to stand on top and look down at Luke, Zach, and Cilian before any of them can claim me.

"Strip for me," I command, relishing the powerful feeling of having three gorgeous pairs of eyes looking up at me like I'm their queen.

Luke's eyebrow quirks into a questioning arc, but he doesn't argue as he reaches for his blue tie and slowly undoes it. Cilian is more than willing, his smile mischievous as he shrugs out of his crimson velvet sports coat. Zach's gaze remains dark, intense as he watches me for a moment. But

when I meet his gaze, he reaches for his tie and undoes it with a slow, deliberate, sexy motion.

I bite my lip as their impressive figures come into view. *How did I ever get so lucky to have these three gods among men want my attention?* Mouth watering, I wait for them to strip all the way down, unable to tear my eyes from the glorious sight.

“Yer turn, lass,” Cilian says as he drops his boxers onto the floor.

“Fair’s fair,” I tease, biting my lower lip playfully as I turn around to reach for the zipper of my dress. I glance back over my shoulder as I draw it down, taking my time to ensure they’re all watching.

Easing the straps down my arms, I let the tulle whisper past my hips and pool at my feet before stepping out of it. Then I turn to toss it to Zach.

He snatches it out of the air, gathering it in his palms. “Mmm, still warm,” he observes, his voice low and dangerously sexy.

It’s far less effort for me to finish undressing myself than it took the guys, and as I face them fully, hooking my thumbs around the waist of my panties, I soak up the ravenous hunger in their eyes.

I ease the lace down inch by inch, bending forward provocatively as I do and peering up at them through my lashes.

“Are ye tryin’ a kills us?” Cilian growls, stepping forward as I slip my panties past my feet.

“What? Did I make you wait too long?” I tease, settling onto the bed and reclining casually.

As one, Cilian and Zach each grasp an ankle and drag me toward the edge of the bed, making me squeal.

“What do you think, love?” Cilian rasps, then he leans in to kiss me fiercely.

Meanwhile, Zach's warm hand travels slowly up my leg, his fingers raising goosebumps on my flesh. They brush across my clit with tantalizing gentleness, and my hips roll greedily. But my torturous moan vanishes between Cilian's lips. The bed shifts as Luke joins me on it, his callused palm cupping my bare breasts and teasing my nipples.

His other hand takes mine and guides it to his cock, hard and thick as he wraps my fingers around it. Heart hammering in my chest, I start to stroke it, then I run the pad of my thumb over his silken head, feeling the drop of precum as it spreads across the tip.

It makes my stomach knot with anticipation.

Reaching out with my other hand, I find Cilian's hard washboard abs and slowly work my way down to his impressive erection. He groans as I grip it, stroking him and Luke at the same time.

I gasp as Zach's lips close around my clit a moment later, his fingers sliding inside my pussy as he overloads my senses. Breasts heaving as I breathe heavily, I can't seem to focus on one sinful pleasure more than the next. The way Cilian's lips consume mine, the way Luke fondles and lavishes affection on my nipples. Zach's expert touch driving me dangerously close to the edge. And all the while, I grip the two rock-hard cocks, stroking them eagerly as I draw lusty groans from Cilian and Zach.

Releasing me from my kiss, Cilian peers deep into my eyes, his gaze soft and filled with passion. Then he leans down to capture one of my nipples between his lips.

I moan, my lips parting as my walls tighten dangerously around Zach's fingers.

Then Luke is by my ear, nipping it playfully. "You're so sexy, Mia. I can hardly stand it."

His words fill me with overwhelming euphoria, and before I know it, I'm toppling over the edge, finding my release in what feels like only a matter of moments. I cry out, this time not worrying about whether anyone might hear me. I'm so lost

in the intensity of my pleasure, I can't find it in me to care what anyone else thinks.

Walls clamping down around Zach's finger, I come hard and fast, my clit fluttering beneath his full lips as he lightly sucks my sensitive bundle of nerves.

Cilian groans, his teeth nipping my taut nipple playfully and sparking a fresh jolt of pleasure that races up and down my spine.

"I want these pretty little lips wrapped around my cock," Luke breathes, his thumb brushing across my lower lip as he leans over me.

I nod, telling him without words that I want it too.

And somehow, as if we're all in perfect harmony, we shift. Luke's strong arm lifts me to a sitting position, and I turn, rolling onto my hands and knees to face him—presenting myself to Cilian in the same movement.

He hums appreciatively, his hands stroking my ass cheeks before he reaches between my thighs to press my clit beneath two fingers. I moan audibly, though my lips are pressed against Luke's cockhead, and it twitches in response.

To my right, I can see Zach watching from the corner of my eye, his hand gripping his swollen erection as he appreciates the sight of me on my hands and knees.

"Zach," I murmur, drawing back from Luke's cock momentarily to reach for the dark and brooding single father.

A dangerous smile spreads across Zach's face, his pleasure clear at being summoned, and as he steps forward, I grasp his cock with my hand and start to stroke him. He swallows visibly, his eyes sliding closed as his hand rests lightly on the small of my back.

Turning my head back to Luke, I peer up at him through my lashes, parting my lips in a silent request.

"God, you're so perfect," he rasps, guiding his silken tip inside my mouth. His fingers are soft as they comb into my

hair, keeping it off my face as I lick his tip, tasting the salty precum there.

“Amen,” Cilian agrees. Then his hands spread my ass cheeks as his tongue strokes long and languorously from my clit to my puckered hole.

My heart breaks into a sprint as my body comes to life anew, and I shiver violently at the euphoria that ripples out to the tips of my fingers and toes. I’m not going to last long before I come again, and I can hardly believe how insatiably I crave the touch of these three men.

“Mmm, I want to fill ye up, love,” Cilian groans as he straightens behind me.

I can’t speak with Luke’s cock so far down my throat, but the thought of Cilian coming inside me is enough to drive me crazy, and I moan, my hips rolling as my desire takes control of my body.

“I’d say that’s a yes,” Zach rasps, his voice hoarse with arousal.

God, I love these men.

A moment later, Cilian’s thick head strokes between my folds, gathering my arousal before he lines up with my throbbing entrance. He eases inside me with such tender care, I nearly come undone before he’s finished his first deep penetration.

I tremble, goosebumps erupting across my back and neck as the intensity of my pleasure sends fireworks exploding behind my eyelids. I groan, long and lustily, and Luke’s fingers tighten in my hair.

“Christ, Mia,” he groans. “You’re going to make me come.”

Is it wrong that the thought of swallowing Luke’s cum excites me to no end?

I don’t care. Peering up at him through my lashes once again, I increase my pace, silently telling him that’s just what I want from him. He groans, the sound deep and carnal, making

my core tighten around Cilian's cock. A soft hiss from behind me tells me that my Irishman feels the difference, and he rocks inside me, his hands gently grasping my hips.

And as I continue to stroke Zach, he reaches down to circle my clit with his fingers. It's so intensely hot I can barely breathe. I love giving myself up to these three men completely. I trust them. I cherish the way they care for me.

Luke grunts, his hips jerking erratically as I bring him to the finish line with my mouth. "I'm coming," he gasps, pressing forward until his silken head hits the back of my throat.

A second later, warm cum coats the back of my tongue, and I swallow convulsively. Luke breathes heavily, his fingers gently caressing my scalp as he silently praises me for taking all of his cum. Then he eases out of my mouth gently.

"That was hot," Zach growls, drawing my attention to him, and I smile playfully.

"You want to see what it looks like firsthand?" I tease.

He growls appreciatively and trades spots with Luke, who sinks onto his knees to take my nipple between his lips while he plays with my clit. I groan, my fingers gripping the bed as the shift in stimulation combined with Cilian's deep thrusts drive me to the point of oblivion.

Rather than put his cock inside my mouth, Zach stoops and presses a soft, tantalizing kiss to my lips.

"Oh, God, I'm coming!" I gasp, the overwhelming bliss of all three men's attention launching me into space.

"Good girl," he murmurs and kisses me more deeply.

My orgasm rips through me this time, clamping down around Cilian's cock like a vise. I sob with the intensity of my pleasure, my nipples throbbing beneath Luke's stimulation, my clit pulsing against his fingers. And all the while, I milk Cilian as he continues to slide in and out of me with deliberate softness.

“Bloody hell,” he groans, and I feel his cock harden further, swelling inside my warm depths. Then, pushing inside me to the hilt, he releases his seed. Bursts of hot cum fill me up until they’re dripping from my slit, coating my clit and intensifying the slick circles Luke makes over my throbbing sex.

I breathe heavily, my air combining with Zach’s as he kisses me through it all.

Then he murmurs softly, “I want to come inside your pussy, angel.”

I nod, still riding the heady cloud of ecstasy pounding through my veins, and as Cilian eases out of me, I slowly sink back onto the bed, unable to hold myself up any longer, I’m so well satiated.

Luke climbs onto the bed behind me, supporting my back as he holds me against his muscular chest, and Cilian sits beside me, kissing me deeply as Zach hooks his arms beneath my knees and angles my hips at the edge of the bed.

Then he slides inside me, his cock filling me effortlessly despite its impressive girth.

“You feel so good,” he groans, his movements gentle.

And it hits me then. Each of these men knows how to play rough and get dirty, but because of the baby, they’ve been so careful. It’s like they’re not just making love to me. They’re worshiping my body. And God, it feels so heavenly, I could almost cry.

“Can you come one more time with me, Mia?” Zach rasps, his hips rolling in the perfect way to both penetrate me deeply, and at the same time, stimulate my clit.

I’m so sensitive from how many times they’ve already made me come, I have no doubt I’ll be at the precipice within moments. “Yes,” I moan, breaking my kiss with Cilian to look up into Zach’s dark, emotion-filled eyes.

I love that even though the other two have already finished, they’re still attending to my needs, their hands touching my body, their lips setting my skin on fire. I pant

with each euphoric penetration, my back arching and my nipples taut as I soak up all their wonderful attention.

I don't know if I'll ever get to have this moment again. But for right now, all three seem willing to play nice in order to ensure I'm left in heavenly bliss, so I intend to enjoy it fully.

Zach and I build together, my arousal only intensified by the groans that escape him and the whispered kisses that Luke and Cilian brush across my skin. And though I've already come more times than I can count, I find myself on the verge once again, my walls tightening around Zach's hard length as he moves inside me with delicious tenderness.

"Come with me, Mia," he rasps, his hips jerking forward, his pace quickening as he drives me over the edge with three powerful thrusts.

I fall apart around him, sobbing with pleasure as I tremble in Luke's arms. The massive Texan holds me firmly, his arms a warm blanket around my throbbing frame. Cilian's lips find mine once again, kissing the breath from my lungs as I'm swept away by the strength of my orgasm.

Zach and I pulse together, his cum pouring deep inside me, mingling with my juices and oozing down my ass crack. I've never felt so well used before, and in such an intimate, emotional way. *Has any woman been lucky enough to have three gorgeous men make love to her in one day?*

I can guarantee none are as lucky as me.

Zach slowly eases out of me, and we all settle onto the bed together, Luke and Zach taking the pillow on either side of me while Cilian takes up sentry by my feet, his hands massaging my arches in the sweetest display of affection.

For a moment, I lay in blissful silence, overwhelmed with happiness to be surrounded by men I love—men I know who would do anything for me.

But I can feel three pairs of eyes on me, and when I open mine to meet their gazes, each in turn, I know that they're waiting, wanting to know which one of them it will be.

Who do I want to raise my child with?

Which man will I call mine?

“I don’t want to choose between you,” I murmur, my voice trembling in my vulnerability. Sitting up, I rest my palms on each of Luke and Zach’s hearts. Then I look deep into Cilian’s emerald eyes. “I care for you all differently but equally, and I just can’t imagine picking. Because if I do, then I’ll be letting go of two men I can’t bear to part with.”

For a moment, I almost hope that my answer will be enough for them. But after a lengthy silence, it seems like choosing is the only option I have. And it’s time. I can’t keep stringing them along forever. But now more than ever, I’m utterly torn.

Can a person have three soulmates?

And if I’ve found them, how am I possibly going to make the right choice to let two go?

ZACHARY

Hearing Mia so happy fills me with intense pleasure.

That is what matters to me most, that she is happy with whom she keeps in her life.

And seeing Cilian so willing to step up to the plate, hearing from his own lips how deeply he feels for Mia, shifted something in me. Before, I was certain the Irishman would be completely wrong for Mia and her baby. I didn't think him capable of wanting a commitment—or a child.

In truth, as soon as Luke accidentally spilled the beans, I expected Cilian to turn and walk away. But to hear him not only confess his feelings but argue for how he could make a better match for her—long term—than either Luke or me?

Now, I actually believe that Mia could be happy with any of the men who have fallen for her. She and her baby would be loved and well cared for no matter who she chose.

Only, I don't want to let her go. And I fear that, if forced to make a decision, she might not want to pick me.

That more than anything freezes my tongue, and I suddenly find myself unable to object to her confession—that she doesn't want to choose between us. *Does that mean she wants to be with all three of us? That we would all be a part of one relationship?*

I've always considered myself a more conventional relationship person. But if that's what Mia wants, I find I'm actually quite open to the idea. I think I would be willing to

share. Cilian, Luke, and I have proven we're perfectly capable of it several times now. And despite the healthy competition we've put into motion over the past two days, we were still able to set that aside and share Mia equally when things got steamy in the library.

Perhaps that's because Mia is so skilled at handling us simultaneously.

But there are also few other men in the world I think I would be willing to share with. And despite our different backgrounds and differences of opinion, I respect both Luke and Cilian. I trust that they love and would care for Mia as well as I intend to. *So, why couldn't we share her?*

If I'm being perfectly honest with myself, I would be willing to take whatever Mia would give me of herself because I'm head over heels for the girl. She's smart, creative, fun, passionate.

She's so open-hearted that she not only took my daughter under her wing but brought her out of her shell, even though Lindsey's been struggling and heartbroken over her mother's unpredictability.

She's a miracle worker with a heart of gold. So, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep Mia. I want to love her and her child in whatever capacity she'll let me.

The silence hangs thick and heavy as we all sit stunned by her statement, no one quite sure how to move forward from this square. Though, by the looks of it, I suspect Cilian and Luke are more closely aligned with my thinking than I had anticipated they could be.

Mia, on the other hand, seems to take our silence as rejection, the tip of her nose growing pink as she fights to hold back tears. I open my mouth to reassure her that I'm on board.

But before I can get a single word out, the bedroom door slams open and one of the staff members comes rushing inside.

"Someone's in here!" I bark, helping Mia pull the covers up around her body as Cilian and Luke close ranks to give her

a bit more privacy.

The maid freezes, her eyes taking in the scene with stunned horror, and her face turns beet red as she realizes what she just walked in on. “I’m so sorry,” she gasps, immediately averting her gaze, her eyes shifting from one spot to the next as if she’s unsure of where it might be safe to look.

Cilian takes the opportunity to scoop his boxers up off the floor, and he slips into them while Luke and I grab pillows to cover our nether regions.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to burst in on you, Miss Florence. It’s just that... your father has arrived. He told me to come fetch you right away.” Her eyes flick up to meet Mia’s, the hint of desperation all the warning we need.

“Shit,” Luke mutters.

The maid yelps and turns away once more as Luke and I dive from the bed, all three of us scrambling to dress before Mike sees something he shouldn’t.

But it’s too late.

I can hear his booming voice just down the hall, and a moment later, he enters through the open door of Mia’s room with a broad smile on his face, a young brunette on his arm.

“Mia, dear, we finally made it. I had to bribe the pilot with an extra week of vacation to get here to—”

He freezes, his words dying on his lips as soon as he registers the sight before him. Mia in bed, her blankets pulled up around her body. Luke, Cilian, and me frozen in various states of undress, and the maid, her back to us, though I can still tell she’s blushing all the way out to the roots of her graying hair.

Mike’s newest young fling—his most recent secretary, if I recall correctly—looks stunned, her blue eyes wide in shock, her full lips slightly parted in disbelief. Then, as if seeking an explanation, she turns to look at Mike, whose face has turned a dangerous shade of puce.

“What—just what the hell is going on here?” he demands, his voice shifting from affectionate to blustering in an instant.

“Daddy, I can explain,” Mia says, her face pale, her eyes wide with fear.

“You’d better have a very good explanation, young lady!” he barks, his temper rising.

“Well, I... that is, we... I mean, it just kind of happened on Halloween—”

“Halloween! You mean you four have...” His face grows apoplectic with rage as he seems to finally take in exactly who is half-naked in the room with Mia. “You bastards. I’ll kill every last one of you for thinking you can lay a hand on my daughter!” he bellows.

“No, Daddy, please! It’s not what you think!” Mia cries.

But before any of us can move or even speak, Mike’s eyes bulge, and his hand goes to his heart. His fingers grasp his shirt as he freezes, his color turning the color of an eggplant.

“Daddy?” Mia asks softly, her voice filled with concern.

Then Mike collapses in a heap, his body hitting the floor like a sack of potatoes.

MIA

Horrified that my antics might have killed my dad, I jump out of bed, racing to his side, the very real possibility that I might not have the opportunity to make things right with him at the forefront of my mind.

“Mike?” Tina collapses onto the floor beside me, her voice scared as she pats my dad’s cheek, trying to wake him.

“Call an ambulance!” I scream desperately when he doesn’t respond.

But Luke’s already on the phone, his voice low and urgent as he rushes to explain what happened. Tears stream down my cheeks as I turn back to my dad to peer at his red face, the veins popping dangerously along his temple and brow.

“Mia,” someone murmurs, and a moment later, soft satin settles around my shoulders as Cilian wraps me in my robe.

“Let me look at him,” Zach insists.

As Cilian guides me to my feet, Zach bends down to press his ear to Daddy’s chest.

“I killed him,” I breathe, shaking as silent sobs rack my body.

“Shh, of course ye didn’t, love. Yer father will be just fine,” Cilian assures me, wrapping me in his strong, steady arms. “But let’s get ya dressed befar the ambulance arrives.”

I nod, wiping at my tears, but they fall just as quickly, soaking my cheeks.

“He’s still breathing,” Zach assures the room, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“The ambulance is on its way. Should be here within five minutes,” Luke adds, slipping his phone back into his pants pocket.

Then he shrugs back into his shirt before striding over to me. He collects me in his arms as Cilian disappears into my closet to find me something to wear. But I can’t take my eyes off my dad. I’m terrified if I do for a second, he might slip away.

In a daze, I dress, and then the ambulance arrives to cart my dad out on a gurney and rush him to the hospital.

“We’ll meet you there,” Zach assures me, his voice soothing as he helps me up into the ambulance alongside Tina.

I nod, releasing his hand as the paramedic closes the door behind me.

And though I hardly know Tina, as we sit and watch the paramedic hook him up to a machine, she takes my hand and gives it a comforting squeeze.



TINA and I sit quietly in the waiting room, all but strangers as we wait to hear any news about my dad’s condition. He was rushed into the emergency room as soon as we got to the hospital, and we’ve heard nothing in the half hour since.

The sliding front doors open, allowing in a brisk flurry of winter air and snow. The bitter draft carries in three masculine figures, their strides urgent as they seek me out with their eyes. I stand, striding forward to meet them, and Luke steps forward to wrap me in his arms.

“Any word?” he asks, concern dripping from his voice as he releases me so Cilian can hug me as well.

I shake my head, my eyes stinging with fresh tears.

“I’m sorry we took so long.” Zach steps forward to take my hand. “I had to find someone who could watch Lindsey, make sure she gets to bed on time.”

“Of course,” I say, sniffing. “I totally understand.”

But I’m riddled with guilt over what happened and weighed down by the decision I know I have to make. I just don’t know what to do, and it feels as though my heart has shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. *What if my dad never recovers?*

Then, tonight, I’ll lose three men I love because of my reckless actions rather than two.

Unable to suppress my emotions, I bury my face in my hands and start to cry.

“Easy, Mia,” Zach murmurs, his arm wrapping around my shoulders as he guides me into one of the waiting room chairs.

“Talk to us, love,” Cilian says, and I can feel him settle into the chair beside me.

When I get myself under control enough to lower my hands, I find Luke kneeling before me, all three men watching me with deep concern in their eyes. My eyes flick to Tina, who sits just a few chairs away, her expression bordering on stunned as she watches us intently.

“I’ll, um, just go get us some coffee,” she offers, realizing she’s been staring for too long. She hops up out of her chair and scurries off, leaving me with my father’s three wonderful friends.

“I’m s–sorry,” I sniffle, a hiccup cutting me off. “I just don’t know what to do. I can’t make up my mind. I’m in love with all three of you, and with Daddy in the hospital... I just... I don’t want to lose any of you.”

A long silence settles over the room as Zach’s thumb strokes a soft, comforting line across the back of my knuckles and Luke’s hand rests gently on my knee.

Then, to my surprise, Cilian speaks up. “What if we share ye?”

Shocked by his suggestion when I was so certain they wanted me to choose, I turn to look at Cilian and find his eyes soft and understanding—not a glimmer of the mischief I would usually find.

“What? We’ve been good at sharing ye in the past, I t’ink. And I would rather do that than not have ye a’tall.”

My heart swells as his words fill me with a hope I hadn’t dared consider a possibility until now. And I look to Luke, then Zach as I try to read their decision on their faces.

“I was going to say the same thing before... shit hit the fan,” Zach says, his dark eyes lighting with a hint of amusement.

“Agreed. If that’s what you want, Mia, then we can make it work.”

“Really?” I breathe, joy flooding me at the thought that I might get to keep all three of the men I’ve fallen so deeply for.

“An’ just to clarify, did ye actually just say yer in love with me?”

I laugh, the sound bursting from me unexpectedly at the bafflement in Cilian’s voice. And when I turn to him, his charming smile soothes my aching heart.

“Yes, I’m in love with you, Cilian O’Connor.”

Leaning in, he kisses me chastely, seeming unable to stop himself.

“If I recall correctly, I think she confessed to being in love with all of us,” Luke points out dryly, breaking our kiss with a fresh round of laughter from me.

“I did. And I am. I honestly didn’t even believe in love three months ago. But I’ve never felt so sure about anything before—and I feel so happy thinking this child will get to have all three of you as fathers.” I rest my hand on my belly, warmth radiating through me.

Then my smile falters. “The only thing that scares me now is facing Daddy with the news. If he’s okay...”

I turn my eyes toward the emergency room doors, my guilt and anxiety spiking once more as I think about the shock I put him through. I can't imagine a worse way for him to find out. I'd hoped I might tell him gently, ease into it, starting with the fact that I was pregnant.

And until now, I'd never dreamed I would be breaking the news to him that I intend to be in a relationship with three of his closest friends.

"Mike's strong. He'll pull through," Luke assures me adamantly.

"And when he does, you won't have to face him alone," Zach adds, his hand squeezing mine reassuringly. "We'll be right there with you."

Luke and Cilian nod agreement, and my shoulders relax for the first time as a massive weight lifts from them.

"Thank you."

A tall, bespectacled man wearing a doctor's lab coat comes out through the emergency room doors, and his eyes land on the four of us gathered in a close circle.

"Mia Florence?" he asks, focusing in on me.

"Yes?" I stand, my heart suddenly in my throat as I pray for him to give me good news.

"It seems your father likely collapsed from shock, but he seems fine now and can see visitors. He's asking for you."

I breathe a laugh, my face splitting into a wide smile as his words ease my anxiety. "Thank you, Doctor." Making a beeline for the swinging doors, my feet feel as light as feathers as I race to see my dad.

LUKE

I follow Mia into the hospital room, flanked by Zach and Cilian. The sterile scent of disinfectant hangs in the air, mixing with the hushed whispers and beeping of machines. Mike lies in the bed, his face pale and drawn, but as soon as our group enters, something changes in his expression and a storm begins brewing behind his weary eyes.

“What the hell are you three doing here?” he growls, his voice gravelly and filled with a volatile edge as he looks pointedly at Zach, Cilian, and me.

Mia rushes forward, concern etched across her face. “Daddy, they came to visit. We were worried about you.”

“Worried?” Mike’s eyebrows buckle into a thunderous frown. “Worried about what? That they didn’t kill me off the first time?”

Zach exchanges a bewildered glance with Cilian, and I feel a knot tightening in my stomach. This isn’t the Mike we know. His anger is explosive, volatile. I’ve never seen him this mad before—not in all the years I’ve known him.

“Daddy, please,” Mia pleads, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Don’t overstress yourself.”

“Don’t stress myself?” he growls in disbelief. “You traitors think you can waltz right in here and pretend to be the honorable men I considered my friends! I’ll kill every last one of you.”

“Daddy!” Mia gasps.

Before we can utter a word in our defense, Mike launches into a tirade that makes my jaw drop. “You, Luke, with your charming smile and supposed loyalty. Zach, the quiet one who hides his true intentions. And Cilian, the joker who can’t be trusted. The three of you, preying on my daughter like vultures while I’m away!”

Mia’s eyes widen as she takes a step forward, and though I know Mike would never lay a hand on his daughter, my instincts urge me to reach out and protect her. But I know she wouldn’t thank me for that right now. So instead, I ball my hands into fists and force myself to remain still.

“That’s not what happened at all,” Mia insists, her voice growing defensive. “These men *are* your friends, and they’ve been nothing but respectful and good to me.”

“Friends?” Mike’s laughter is harsh, echoing off the sterile walls. “Friends who can’t wait to get their hands on you. The lecherous bastards. You stay away from my daughter. She’s too young and far too good for any of you. I won’t let you ruin her life!”

As if possessed by some twisted determination, Mike starts to climb out of his hospital bed. “I’ll knock your lights out, you cowards. Sneaking behind my back!”

“Daddy, what are you doing?” Mia shrieks. “Get back in bed right now! You just recovered from a collapse. You’re going to give yourself a heart attack!”

Panic seizes me, and I exchange a frantic glance with Zach and Cilian. We move in unison, grabbing Mike’s arms, trying to restrain him before he hurts himself.

“Mike, calm down!” I urge, struggling to keep his flailing limbs in check.

But he’s beyond reason, his eyes wild with fury. “Let me go! I’ll teach you all a lesson. You call yourself my business partner. Well, I’d rather liquidate the entire venture than let you near my daughter ever again!”

Mia’s face looks stricken, and she places her palms on his chest as she tries to make him look her in the face. “Daddy,

please! You don't mean it. You just need to calm down and take a minute."

But Mike is relentless. He continues to thrash against our attempts to hold him back, his face turning an alarming shade of red. The beeping of the machines in the room increases, matching the rapid tempo of my heart.

And just as it seems like things are spiraling out of control, the door swings open, and in walks Tina. Our former secretary and Mike's current young girlfriend carries a tray of coffees in one hand. "What on earth is going on here?" Her gaze flicks from Mike to us, and she sets the tray down on a nearby table.

"I'm about to teach these bastards a lesson." Mike's eyes narrow at each of us, but Tina simply plants her hands on her hips.

"Mike, you're being silly. You really need to calm down. Can you really blame your friends for developing feelings for Mia?"

Mike's struggles lessen as Tina seems to have gotten through to him. "Yes," he grumbles. "I can't believe you would still call them my friends after we found them in bed with my daughter," he mutters, eyeing us suspiciously. "She's nearly half your age. You watched her grow up, for God's sake, you sick, twisted bastards."

"Like you're one to talk," Tina chides, crossing her arms as she pops her hip. "Considering you just got engaged to someone the same age as your daughter. Love doesn't always have to make sense. It finds people in the most mysterious of ways. You should be happy for Mia because she's clearly found three men you both respect and care for a great deal."

The room falls into a stunned silence. Even Mike seems shocked out of his anger by Tina's speech. Then Mia's eyes widen as they shift between Tina and her father.

"Engaged?" I echo, astonishment coloring my tone.

Tina grins, holding out her hand to reveal a sparkling engagement ring. "Surprise!" she declares.

Mia's shock transforms into disbelief. "Daddy, you got engaged? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was going to. That was the surprise I told you about over the phone," he huffs gruffly, his face twitching with indignation.

Mia steps forward, a mixture of emotions crossing her face. "Well, congratulations. I'm happy for you."

Zach, Cilian, and I echo the sentiment, offering our congratulations, albeit in stunned confusion. But the atmosphere in the room remains charged. It's as if a storm has passed, leaving behind a strange calm.

Mia, however, isn't ready to let the moment pass. "Well, this definitely proves Tina's point. If you can find love again, then you should at least hear me out."

There's a pregnant pause as Mike considers her words. Mia watches him with a hopeful expression, and the rest of us hold our breath, waiting for his response. Then Mike's gaze softens, and the tension in the room seems to dissipate, replaced by an unspoken understanding.

Finally, Mike sighs, the fight draining out of him. "Fine. Tina, may I have a moment with my daughter? Alone." His gaze shifts pointedly to Zach, Cilian, and me on his final word.

And after a quick glance to meet Mia's eye and make sure she's okay on her own, I follow the others from the room.

MIA

With as much time as I spent during this holiday retreat trying to surround myself with men who might support me against my dad's anger, in the end, I know this is a conversation I need to have with him alone.

Still, as Luke shuffles last out of the room, closing the door behind him, I glance around, anxiety tightening my chest. The air is thick with the smell of ammonia, and the weight of my confession sits heavily on my tongue, a secret I've held too long.

Daddy's eyes meet mine, weary and apprehensive. I take a deep breath, steadying myself for what lies ahead. This is a conversation I couldn't avoid any longer, no matter how desperately I wish otherwise.

I choose my words carefully, aware that every syllable will carve deeper into our already strained relationship and potentially send him into shock once again. "Daddy, I know this is going to be hard for you to swallow, but there's something I need to tell you. And I need you to hear me out before you say anything."

His gaze narrows, and a heavy sigh escapes his lips. "Alright, Mia. I'm listening."

I draw another breath, feeling the gravity of the words I'm about to release into the room. "On Halloween night, I tried to seduce Luke, Zach, and Cilian in a juvenile effort to get back at you for insisting I grow up and find my path in life. It was stupid and childish, I know, but I slept with them. And I don't

want you to be upset with them because I promise they didn't once try anything with me until I asked for it."

His eyes darken, a storm brewing beneath the surface. "They seemed perfectly willing accomplices this evening," he growls.

"Well... yeah, but you haven't let me finish. You promised you would listen until the end."

Grumbling through clenched teeth, Daddy falls silent once again.

"I know it was wrong, Daddy. I know. I should never have explored the temptation because I know how much they mean to you. And I swear, I had no intention of letting things get so out of hand. But somehow, things just... snowballed. I've gotten to know them much better—not just physically—"

Daddy groans audibly, his head falling into his hands, and my gut wrenches as I realize there are some details I should probably leave out.

I continue more tentatively, choosing my words with care. "I've gotten to know them as the men you love and respect. And in doing so, I've discovered something about myself. It was Cilian, actually, who helped me find my direction, my purpose, something that makes me happy and fulfilled—a passion I want to pursue that might actually make you proud."

His jaw tightens, but he remains silent, waiting for me to continue as he watches me once again.

"I want to start my own business," I blurt, my words rushing out like a torrent. "I want to bake and decorate cookies for special events."

Daddy's eyebrows furrow, confusion replacing some of the anger on his face. "Cookies? Mia, is this a joke?"

"No," I insist, stepping forward to grasp my dad's hand. "Don't you remember all those years we used to bake and decorate cookies for your Christmas parties? Before you hired a chef? That's what I want to do with my life. People have plenty of occasions now that they like to provide cookies for—"

engagement parties, for example,” I tease pointedly, giving his hand a squeeze.

But he seems too overcome by the conversation to be able to take a joke.

“Anyway, I decided to make the Christmas cookies for your retreat this year. Once we get back to the party, I can show you what I had in mind.”

“And where would you run this business out of?” he asks gruffly, seeming to wrap his mind around it for the first time.

“Well, probably my house to start. But once things pick up, maybe I’ll rent a space and open a little shop.” I’m improvising now, but as the words leave my mouth, they just feel right.

“Well, I’m happy to hear that some good has come out of this disaster,” Daddy says, and my chest tightens as I realize I’m not out of the woods yet.

“There’s more to this confession,” I say, my voice softening. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but I’ve fallen for them, Daddy—Zach, Luke, and Cilian. They’re three wonderful men who have shown me love and support in ways I never thought possible. And I think I can make a relationship work with them.”

“*All* of them?” he asks incredulously, his face reddening in exasperation.

“Yes. I know it’s not conventional, but it works for us. They’ve agreed to give it a try, and it’s what I want.”

His silence stretches, an unbearable weight in the room, and I can see the storm of emotions raging behind his eyes, but he remains stoic. Finally, I can’t take the silence any longer.

“There’s something else,” I whisper, unable to say it any louder.

“Christ, Mia. It’s only been two months since I saw you last. How can you possibly have managed to collect so many secrets in that time?” he demands.

“Well... they’re all kind of... connected,” I admit nervously.

But the subtle hint flies right over his head, and Daddy stares at me openly, waiting for me to drop the bomb. *Like ripping off a Band-Aid, right?*

“I’m pregnant,” I finally say, the admission lingering in the air like an explosion. “It happened on Halloween, and I’m certain it’s one of theirs.”

“But you don’t know which one?”

I shake my head, dropping my eyes as I consider how I can say this as delicately as possible. “It would be impossible to know without a paternity test since I was... with all three of them that night. But to me, it doesn’t matter who’s the father. I’ve made up my mind. I’m keeping the baby.”

“Mia, you’re so young. Are you sure about this? It’s a huge responsibility.”

“I am, Daddy. I’ve thought about it a lot, and I want to do this. I’m not alone, though. I have Cilian, Luke, and Zach. We’re going to figure this out together. I want to raise this child with them. I want to create a family with them, even if it’s not traditional. They make me happy, Daddy. Can’t you be happy for me? I’m happy for you and Tina.”

His face darkens, and for a moment, I fear he might actually have a heart attack. The seconds tick by, each one stretching into an eternity. The room is stifling, the air heavy with anticipation.

Finally, he speaks, his voice a hoarse whisper. “You’ve left me speechless, Mia. I don’t even know where to begin.”

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” I admit, my voice quavering. “But I need you to understand. I need your support, even if you don’t agree. This is my life, my choice. And I want you to be a part of it, even if it’s not what you expected or maybe envisioned for me.”

He continues to stare at me, a storm of conflicting emotions playing out on his face. The silence hangs between

us, a fragile bridge waiting to either collapse or hold the weight of the truths I've laid bare.

Releasing a heavy breath, my dad smiles, his eyes softening. "Honey, I will always support you. Even if I want to strangle those three idiots for ever thinking they could deserve you."

That makes me laugh, and I lean in, wrapping my arms around my dad's neck in a fierce hug. "I love you too," I breathe, happy tears stinging the backs of my eyes.

CILIAN

I stand outside the hospital room, doing my best to listen in without putting my ear against the door. It's not something I usually do—eavesdrop on private conversations—but this is different. This is Mia and her father, discussing something I'm confident Mike will not be happy about.

I need to know what's going on.

After how angry he got when we walked in the room, I'm not taking any chances, even if I know Mike would never intentionally hurt his daughter.

The voices inside are hushed, and it takes a moment for the words to register. Mia is speaking, her tone filled with a mixture of determination and vulnerability. I strain to catch every word.

"I've made up my mind. I'm keeping the baby."

The revelation hangs in the air, and I can almost feel the weight of it pressing down on Mia's shoulders. There's a pause, then Mike's voice, gruff and concerned, breaks through.

"Mia, you're so young. Are you sure about this? It's a huge responsibility."

"I am, Daddy. I've thought about it a lot, and I want to do this. I'm not alone, though. I have Cilian, Luke, and Zach. We're going to figure this out together. I want to raise this child with them. I want to create a family with them, even if it's not traditional. They make me happy, Daddy. Can't you be happy for me?"

My heart swells with a mixture of pride and admiration for Mia. She's strong, and she's not afraid to face the challenges life has thrown at her. I glance at Luke and Zach, and I can see the same emotions mirrored in their eyes.

Suddenly, the weight of the competition we've had for Mia's attention seems trivial. It's clear that what matters most now is supporting her through this unexpected journey. We share a look, one that silently communicates our unspoken agreement—the rivalry is over. We're a team now, united in our commitment to make Mia happy and to care for the child she's chosen to keep.

As we stand there in silent conference, the door creaks open, and Mia steps out. Her blue eyes meet mine, and there's a vulnerability in them that I haven't seen before. It's as if she's seeking reassurance, confirmation that she's not alone.

I flash a smile to show her we're still here. We didn't go anywhere.

"Hey," she says, her voice soft. "Thanks for giving us a moment. And for staying nearby."

I nod, my hand instinctively reaching out to squeeze hers. "Ye don't have to thank us, Mia. We're here for ye."

She smiles, a mixture of gratitude and relief on her face. "You want to come back in? Daddy would like to talk to you." Then her eyes shift past us to Mike's new fiancée, who leans against the wall, all but forgotten in the tense moment. "You too, Tina," she says with a newfound warmth. "Thanks for stepping outside."

"Of course." Tina grins, pushing off the wall to join us.

Our footsteps echo in the sterile corridor as we follow Mia into the room. Mike is propped up in the hospital bed, a faint smile on his face as he sees us entering.

"Ah, the three musketeers," he says, his voice sarcastic but far calmer than the last time we saw him. "I should've known better than to leave my daughter alone with you three," he jokes. "As far as I'm concerned, you're villains of the worst kind for corrupting her and getting her pregnant—"

“Daddy,” she warns, and he gives her an appeasing gesture before continuing.

“She asked for my support and understanding, and as my daughter, she will always have it. Still, in my eyes, none of you could possibly be worthy of her. But it appears I’ve been out-voted.”

Luke chuckles. “Well, we can’t argue with you there. But that was going to be true of any man who pursued your daughter.”

Mike chuckles, a sound that echoes through the room. “Perhaps you’re right.”

The tension in the room eases as the banter erases the rest of the bad feelings surrounding Mia’s confession, and I’m rather impressed by Mike’s ability to recover from such an unexpected discovery as walking in on us all in Mia’s room.

“I suppose I should congratulate you fellas,” he continues after a moment’s pause. “As Mia tells it, you’ve managed to help her find her drive when I’ve been trying for her whole life.”

“She’s given us too much credit,” I insist, though pride warms my chest as I think back on our conversation last night, the way Mia’s eyes lit up with anticipation as she realized she’s talked her way to the solution to her problems.

Mike’s eyes shift to me, and he studies me closely for a moment, his scrutiny familiar, though he’s considering me for a different purpose than our relationship has ever endured before. This time, he’s truly measuring my worth, and in the span of a moment, I see him resolve to support his daughter’s choice—despite his own reservations.

Clearing his throat of emotion, Mike says gruffly, “If I could trust anyone with her, it would be the three men standing in this room.”

The sincerity in his words catches me off guard. It moves me and makes me want, more than ever, to do right by Mia, to prove I’m worthy of her love—and my friend’s trust.

“But,” he adds, his expression turning deadly, “if any of you so much as puts one toe out of line, I’ll wipe you off the face of the earth. Understood?”

The threat is delivered with a slight twinkle in his eye, and we nod, a mixture of amusement and genuine understanding. We know he’s protective of Mia, and rightly so. She’s a special girl, someone worth defending, no matter the cost.

“Don’t worry, Mike,” I joke—well, mostly—flashing a wicked grin. “If Luke or Zach screws up in any way, I’ll be right there with you, ready to destroy them.”

For a moment, the statement sits heavily in the room, I suspect because of the close connections I have to the Irish mafia in New York. My threat probably sounds far more legitimate. I don’t mind. If the other two men I’ve entrusted Mia’s heart to believe their deaths would shortly follow any betrayal they might commit, all the better. They’ll be less likely to commit it in the first place.

But before it can get too serious, Mike’s laughter fills the room, breaking the tension once again. Tina giggles nervously, and Mia rolls her eyes at our banter. It’s a moment of levity in what could be a daunting situation. Today, we’ve become a family in the truest sense, bound not by blood but by a shared commitment to love and protect Mia and her unborn child.

MIA

I barely slept a wink last night, despite the doctor's assurance that my dad is just fine. Still, they didn't want to discharge him until this morning, so as the sun paints the sky in hues of pink and gold, Tina and I head out into Aspen's winter wonderland to bring him back home.

The car ride is silent, save for the low hum of the engine. Daddy sits in the back seat with us, his eyes glazed with fatigue but a small, grateful smile playing on his lips. We pull up to the grandiose mansion, adorned with twinkling lights and a wreath on the door, a stark contrast to the sterile hospital walls.

I follow Daddy out of the car, the crisp morning air hitting us and fogging our breath as we walk, waking me up from the drowsiness that had settled in my bones.

Inside, the house is warm, filled with the scents of cinnamon and pine. I've spent the last few hours preparing for this moment, determined to make it the best Christmas morning despite the rocky start.

We head to the living room, where we're greeted by the other early risers who celebrate Daddy's triumphant return with warm Christmas wishes. He beams as he sinks into the couch with a tired sigh. I sit next to him and Tina, feeling a mix of emotions—gratitude for his recovery, exhaustion from the night at the hospital and the tough conversation that took place there—but I also have an overwhelming desire to make this Christmas memorable.

The house is still fairly quiet, most of the guests asleep in their beds after a late night of dancing. Cilian and Luke sit by the fireplace, drinking coffee as they talk quietly, and Zach and Lindsey occupy the couch to our left, him working on a crossword while she types in her phone.

Lindsey looks up from her phone, her eyes lighting up when she sees us. “Glad you could finally make it, Mr. Florence. I was starting to think I wouldn’t see you this Christmas.”

“Thanks, Lindsey,” he says gruffly. “But it’s going to take a lot more than that to stop this old man.”

“Daddy, you’re forty-five. I’d hardly call that *old*,” I point out. After learning just how fit a forty-five-year-old man can be, it’s nice to realize my dad is still very much in his prime.

“And don’t you forget it,” he jokes. Then he turns his attention back to Lindsey. “Are you ready to open your present?”

“You got me something?” she asks, surprised.

“Of course! I think it’s that one to the right, with the metallic-blue wrapping,” he says, pointing to a good-sized box beneath the tree.

Lindsey hops up excitedly, racing to grab it. As my eyes follow her across the room, I realize Cilian is watching me, his green eyes warm with affection. A smile dances across his lips, and he gives a slight head tilt, indicating he would love a moment alone with me.

I grin, rising from my seat to join him, and we find a quiet corner to talk, away from the laughter and chatter in the living room.

His gaze lingers on the Christmas tree, his eyes thoughtful for a moment. “Ye know, Mia, I’ve never really done Christmas with me family befar. It was never a big thing for us,” he confesses, his tone tinged with emotion.

I’m taken aback, having never known this side of Cilian. I’d always pictured he was part of one of those big families

with more holiday traditions than they know what to do with. “Really? Why not?”

He shrugs, a slight smile playing on his lips. “Let’s just leave it at I don’t have a very conventional family. But being here, with yer family, it feels... nice. I’m happy ta have found a place in it.”

His words linger in the air, and I realize that Christmas, for all its festive cheer, can be a lonely time for so many. I feel blessed to be surrounded by so much love. I give Cilian a grateful smile, touched by his honesty. “I am too,” I admit, my heart swelling to think of just how fortunate I’ve been this year.

Wrapping his arm around my waist, Cilian pulls me close, pressing a chaste kiss discretely to my lips, not wanting to disrupt my dad’s good mood by crashing his party with some PDA, and for a brief moment, I melt into Cilian, savoring his warm embrace.

“Mmm. You taste like coffee,” I moan longingly.

He chuckles. “Missing it?”

“You have no idea,” I whine, then I smile because, in truth, nothing has been so challenging to give up when it means doing right by my baby. I would gladly give up coffee for nine months to ensure my baby’s healthy and happy.

Cilian and I return to the living room, where I catch Dad stealing glances at me throughout the morning, a mix of pride and love in his eyes. It’s a look I’m not accustomed to, one that makes my heart swell with emotion.

Finally, it’s time I bring in the Christmas cookies I’d spent so much time baking and decorating to pitch my business plan. The room falls silent as I do so, my nerves making me extra giddy as all eyes land on me.

“Now, be honest because I’m serious about trying to start a business with this idea. You have to tell me if they’re just not good enough,” I insist nervously, walking the tray of cookies around the room so everyone can take one.

“These are amazing, Mia!” Zach exclaims, admiring his cookie’s icing.

Luke nods in agreement, a warm smile on his face. “So soft—and sweet. A perfect combination.” His eyes twinkle, letting me know he’s not just talking about the cookie.

I blush and smile, then I glance at Dad, and for the first time in a long while, as he takes a bite, he seems very present. His eyes fill with emotion, and he pulls me into a tight hug.

“I’m so proud of you, honey,” he whispers in my ear.

I feel a lump in my throat, the weight of his words sinking in. For a second, time stands still, and I savor the warmth of his embrace. It’s a rare moment of vulnerability for both of us, a bridge mended through the simple act of sharing cookies on Christmas morning.

And I love that, once again, it’s Christmas cookies that have brought us closer. Just like they did when I was a kid.

As the day unfolds, I find myself surrounded by the people who matter most to me. Lindsey and I bond over baking, anime, and travel plans, building upon our connection that goes beyond our roles as the daughters of our respective families. Zach, Cilian, and Luke share stories, laughter filling the air, creating memories that will linger long after the holiday season is over.

In a quiet moment between the festivities, my dad and I steal away for a private conversation. We sit by the fireplace, the crackling flames casting a warm glow on our faces.

“You know, Mia,” Daddy begins, his voice filled with sincerity, “I know I haven’t always been the most present father. I know I missed out on a lot, and I’m sorry for that.”

I look at him with a mix of surprise and understanding. “It’s okay. We all have our moments.”

He takes a deep breath, his gaze fixed on the dancing flames. “But I want you to know that I am immensely proud of the woman you’ve become, and I can’t wait to see you as a mother. Don’t ever tell them I said this, but only you would be worthy and capable of capturing the hearts of Zach, Cilian,

and Luke. They're like brothers to me, and though I can't imagine anyone is worthy of you, I think you've found three very good men."

His words hang in the air, and I reach for his hand, squeezing it gently. "Thanks, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you too, honey." He pats the top of my knuckles with his free hand, his smile soft, affectionate.

The day continues, filled with laughter, love, and the warmth of shared moments. I watch as Daddy chuckles with his friends, his new fiancée at his side. And Lindsey bonds with the people around her, finally coming out of her shell. That's when I realize that Christmas is more than just a day on the calendar. It's a celebration of the connections we forge, the bonds that withstand the test of time.

As the evening draws to a close and the last of the guests turn in for the night, I find myself surrounded by the three men who have made this Christmas the best one I've ever had. We snuggle close to the fire, all sharing a blanket as we form our own cocoon of warmth.

And in that moment, with the snowflakes dancing outside and the twinkle of Christmas lights illuminating our faces, I realize that sometimes, the most meaningful gifts come not wrapped in paper and bows but in the form of shared moments, forgiveness, and the simple joy of being together.

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later

I step onto the balcony, the chill of the crisp Aspen air sending shivers down my spine. The breathtaking view of the snow-capped mountains stretches out before me, a serene backdrop to the small gathering of the most important people in my life. Zach, Luke, and Cilian stand beside me, their hands intertwined with mine, a tangible manifestation of the unbreakable bond we've forged over the past several months. And now we're back in my father's Colorado home, where it all began.

It's been a whirlwind journey of self-discovery and unexpected love over the past few months, growing together with the men I love, even as our child grows inside me. And as I glance at each of the men beside me, I can't help but marvel at the depth of our connection.

Luke, with his warm and steady presence, has been my anchor through the storm. Cilian, the passionate and adventurous soul, has brought a vibrant energy into my life. Zach, with his calm and nurturing demeanor, completes the trio, filling the gaps with unwavering support.

My gaze shifts to my father and Tina, who stand a few feet away, their smiles radiating genuine happiness. It took time, but I've come to see Tina in a different light. She's not the stereotypical bimbo Daddy used to be so keen on dating, as I'd

once assumed. She's smart, caring, and has seamlessly integrated herself into our unconventional family.

My father's acceptance of my lifestyle has been a surprising twist, a testament to the resilience of familial bonds, and in no small part is thanks to his fiancée.

The swell of my belly beneath my hands is a constant reminder of the new chapter about to unfold. Pregnancy has a way of intensifying emotions, and as my due date approaches, the desire for commitment and stability has grown more pronounced. Tonight is not just a celebration—it's a declaration of the love between me and my three men, a promise for the future.

Zach squeezes my hand, his eyes locked onto mine, a silent reassurance that echoes louder than words. Luke's fingers trace patterns on my back, a comforting gesture that resonates with the wild beating of my heart. Cilian's hand rests protectively on my belly, his touch a soothing balm to the nerves that accompany the anticipation of motherhood.

Lindsey joins us on the balcony, wearing another of the dresses I've outgrown. Her eyes meet mine, filled with a mix of understanding and acceptance. She's been a true joy to get to know. She's something of a little sister to me, though I'm dating her father, and I positively adore her. Her presence tonight reinforces the bonds that extend beyond the romantic, weaving a tapestry of connections that make us stronger.

The officiant, my father's good friend Harry Snipe, stands at the center, ready to guide us through the commitment ceremony. We gather in a circle, the panoramic mountains serving as silent witnesses to the vows we are about to exchange.

As the ceremony progresses, each of my men expresses their commitment to me. Zach starts, his dark gaze warm as he turns his full attention on me.

"I'll keep this short," he promises. "Otherwise, we might be here all night listening to the wonderful things I could say about you, Mia Florence."

That sends a ripple of laughter through the intimate gathering of friends.

“You’re a light that brightens the darkest of nights, a breath of fresh air after drowning. You have such an open, giving heart, and words cannot express my gratitude for your taking my daughter, Lindsey, under your wing. So, on this day, I vow to protect that light within you, to worship your ability to breathe happiness into my life, and I will love you without reservation, as you deserve to be loved.”

My heart melts at his sweet words, and I desperately want to kiss Zach for his romantic spirit, but I know I’m not supposed to until the end. So instead, I give his hands a warm squeeze before he passes me off to Luke.

“I’m not nearly as poetic as all that,” he assures me with a crooked grin. “But I vow, Mia, to love you for all of my days, to protect and cherish you, to comfort you if ever you’re in need—and to work every day to make you happy.”

Luke passes my hands to Cilian, and he flashes me a mischievous grin.

“Well, lass. Ye stole me heart befar I even knew I had one,” he confesses, making me laugh. “And I thank ye fer findin’ it. Because every day, I feel blessed to know it’s safe in yer hands. Just as ye have my heart, I vow to protect yers. And years down the road, when people ask who loved another best, I know that they’ll say it was me who loved ye more than all the stars in the sky.”

Their words are heartfelt, sincere, and as I listen, I feel a profound sense of gratitude. Gratitude for the love that has grown, for the understanding that has deepened, and for the family that has expanded in ways I never imagined.

When it’s my turn to say my vows, they flow like water through me, effortless in their sincerity. “Never could I have dreamed I might find a Prince Charming to cherish me the way you do. And somehow, I got so lucky to have not one Prince Charming but three. You each have shown me such care and consideration. You’ve taught me what loyalty and love truly mean. Zach, Luke, Cilian, words can’t express the depth of my

love for you, and I vow to nurture that love and watch it grow because together, I believe we can get through anything.”

We exchange rings, symbolic tokens of our commitment. The metal is cool against my skin as all three men slide the ring onto my finger together, sealing the promise we’ve made to each other. Then I follow suit, fitting a ring to each of their fingers, their expressions filled with love and devotion as I peer into each of their eyes in turn.

The officiant pronounces us committed, and we seal the ceremony with a kiss. The moment lingers, a shared connection that transcends the physical, binding us together in a way that words alone cannot capture.

Then it’s time for a lavish dinner, a celebration of the love that has brought us to this moment. Laughter, clinking glasses, and the warmth of shared stories fill the air. It’s a beautiful night, a heartwarming celebration, and I’m so happy we chose to do it before the baby comes. It makes us officially a family, prepared to welcome our little girl into the world as a united force. And after three months of growing together and building as a team, I truly believe we can do it—Luke, Zach, Cilian, and I. And with the support of those we love surrounding us, this child is going to be spoiled beyond reason, I’m sure.

Finally, it’s time to turn in for the night, and despite my now prominent belly, I make love with each of my men. It’s not the same kind of fiery sex that first brought me this gift of life. I’m too pregnant for that now. Instead, I spend time with them individually, reinforcing the strength of our attraction, the depth of our love. Nothing will stop us from reveling in the bliss of knowing that we chose one another, we’ve formed a bond that will last a lifetime.

And after we’re done, in the quiet moments before sleep claims me, I find myself reflecting on the journey that brought us here. From the initial apprehension to the deep-seated love we now share, every step has been worth it. The commitment ceremony was not just a formality. It was a reaffirmation of the bonds that hold us together.

I lie in the arms of my three men, their rhythmic breathing a soothing lullaby. The baby inside me kicks gently, a reminder of the new life that will soon join our fold. In this moment, surrounded by the warmth of love and acceptance, I feel a sense of completeness. The journey is far from over, but as I close my eyes, I know that whatever lies ahead, we'll face it together, a united front against the uncertainties of the future.

BROTHER'S BEST FRIENDS FOR CHRISTMAS (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

*Louise wants a baby. We want a family.
And this Christmas, we're giving her both.*

CARTER

I know better than to develop feelings for Louise, but I seem to be stuck in the same lovestruck frenzy as my three best friends. The only solution is sharing the woman who has captured our attention...

REN

I offer myself up as a donor on Louise's quest to get pregnant... but I have ulterior motives. My crush on her makes me lose my mind because I would do anything to keep my precious girl happy.

ISAAC

When I'm assigned a new patient for fertility treatments, I reluctantly accept... but Louise Romain is my best friend's little sister, and he's way too protective. Probably because he knows how much I want his stunning, curvy sister in my bed...

DYLAN

I've been taking care of adorable Louise's sweet dog, but there's a lot more I want from the gorgeous girl. Little does Louise know, her pooch is an excuse so I can spend more time with her.

LOUISE

“Happy Birthday!”

Having spent three hours melting over the stove, another hour waiting for the cake to cool, and two more decorating Dylan’s birthday cake, it was difficult to remain satisfied as I cast a critical eye over where it sat dead center on the staff room table. The perfectionist in me constantly saw things I could change.

No matter how many years I poured into baking, I could never be satisfied with the final product. The curse of creativity.

Dylan Beckett, one of my brother’s oldest friends, stood in the doorway with his white coat askew across his shoulders and red hair ruffled from far too many restless fingers. With his eyes wide and mouth agape, I stepped forward and spread my arms open once more, shaking out my fingers.

“Happy Birthday?! Shit... do I have the wrong day?” Dropping my arms, I returned to the table covered in various finger foods and hunted for my bag.

“No.” Dylan declared finally with a laugh. “I just didn’t expect anything, Louise. This is amazing!”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I chuckled, abandoning the search for my bag as the nest of alarmed snakes in my gut calmed down. “You worried me for a second there.”

“Sorry, it’s just been a long day, y’know?” Dylan swept forward and bundled me up into his strong arms.

“Ah, lots of bones to break?”

Standing a full head and shoulders taller than me, I was often dwarfed by his hugs, but deep down, part of me has enjoyed that ever since my brother came home from medical school with Dylan in tow all those years ago. Never had he been so excited to make a friend.

I pulled back from the hug when Dylan’s hand slid down my back and he flashed me a bright smile.

“Louise, you know my job as an orthopedic surgeon is to *fix* the bones, right? Not break them.”

“Sure, but you have to do a little breaking sometimes, right?” I grinned up at him and ducked sharply as Dylan’s hand rose to ruffle through my hair. “Hey! Watch the curls!”

“You know she *hates* it when you mess with her hair,” came another voice from the doorway. Dylan laughed and approached the table, immediately tackling the mini sausage rolls while I turned and greeted Ren Adams with a warm smile.

“He never learns!” I darted forward and threw myself into Ren’s arms as he entered the staff room.

“Purple?” Ren asked, catching some of my curls between his tanned fingers. “Last time I saw you, your hair was green.”

“Well, if you’d shown up to dinner last month like I asked, you would have seen it,” I remarked, shaking my hair free of his light touch. Ren laughed as he squeezed my shoulders with one arm. My heart soared; his smile always made his almond-shaped eyes crinkle cutely at the corners, and for as long as I’d known him, the smallest crush had bubbled just under the surface.

A girl could dream.

“You’ll do all this for my birthday, right?” Ren chuckled, moving to where Dylan was on his fourth mini sausage roll and going strong.

“I do it for everyone’s birthday; why would your next one be any different?”

“Just making sure. A cake this good? I keep telling you, post this stuff online, and soon you’ll be too famous to make cakes for our birthdays.”

“Well,” I scoffed lightly, “better make the most of it while you can.”

“Don’t say that,” Dylan whined, “your buttercream is to die for.”

“And what better place to do that than here,” came a third voice. I turned and Carter entered, his white coat draped over one arm and dark circles shadowed under his eyes. My heart went out to them each time I saw any of them. Being a surgeon couldn’t be easy, and if I could soothe their stress with cakes then that’s what I would do.

“Carter! You’re late; you said you’d help me set up,” I scolded gently. Carter offered a soft smile—being the attending pediatric surgeon, Carter carried a little more weight on his shoulders than the others, and I couldn’t at all fathom the pressure of conducting surgery on *children*.

“Sorry, Louise, surgery ran late and then I was just...” Carter dragged a hand through his shoulder-length blond hair and puffed his cheeks out, unable to word what turmoil lay beneath the surface.

“Eat a sausage roll,” Dylan remarked with his mouth full. “Everything feels better.”

“It’s true,” I agreed. Carter passed me by, pressing a kiss to my cheek as he did so.

“Is this another of your amazing creations?” Carter asked, and he chuckled while leaning close. “How fast are we going to eat this one?”

“Hands off!” Dylan snapped. “It’s mine. It’s my birthday.”

“Technically your birthday was two days ago.” My brother, Todd, swept through the door flanked by the fifth member of their medical group, Isaac.

“Todd!”

“Hey, sis. No problems setting up, I trust?”

“Nah, Nancy was pretty excited actually. I paid her in French Fancies and she left me to it.” With a warm smile, I hugged my brother tightly and kissed his cheek, then moved on to Isaac who chuckled when our hug bumped his glasses and sent them slightly skewed across his nose.

“Hey, it’s good to see you.” Isaac’s smile was lighter than the others. He always carried himself with a much more serious air, and even when he was having a good time, he always seemed ready to slip back to *responsible* mode at the drop of a hat.

“I brought those mini veggie quiches that you like so much.” Pointing at the table, half the food was hidden by the four other bodies scoffing down their first meal in likely hours. Isaac lightly patted my lower back.

“You’re a good egg.” He grinned. “I like the purple.”

“Thank you.” Lifting my hands, I gently crimped the bottom of my curls. “Goes with my tights, don’t you think?”

“Rue the day Louise turns up without brightly colored tights,” Carter laughed around a mouthful of bread.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” One hand on my plump waist, I cocked a hip as laughter rose.

“All he’s saying is that your personality matches your tights.” Ren grinned at me, departing the table with a paper plate towering high. “No bright tights means you’re on the warpath.”

“That’s not true.” I paused, and warmth flooded my cheeks. “Is it?”

“You remember when Natalie insulted your cupcakes?” Todd asked, raising a brow. “Gray tights for two days straight.”

“And when you lost out on that job at Marz?” Carter added with a smirk. “Black tights for a week.”

My mouth opened and closed, seeking a way to counter their points, but now that it was laid out, they did have a point.

“Alright,” I chuckled, weaving between them to pick up a plastic cup filled with non-alcoholic bubbly. “I concede.”

“You roll over too quickly.” Ren winked at me, popping the remains of a cake pop into his mouth, then he moaned softly and the warmth previously in my cheeks swept rapidly south.

“Your cakes, Louise, fucking phenomenal.”

“Thank you!” Hopefully amidst the noise and laughter, no one caught the slight uptick in my tone, but Ren’s gaze lingered on me until Isaac stepped in the way with his phone in hand.

“I meant to text you,” Isaac said with a smile, “but Amy had her twins!”

My focus immediately honed in on his phone and a pulse of tension wove through my chest.

“Twins?! Oh my God, let me see!”

“Here we go,” Todd groaned from the couch. “Isaac, she’s already baby crazy. She doesn’t need any more fuel.”

“Fuck you, Todd,” I snapped quickly.

Isaac tapped through his phone and pictures of his sister flashed up on the screen rosy-faced and utterly beaming. In her arms were two of the cutest, tiniest babies I had ever seen in my life. The tension in my chest swept up to my throat, and I pressed my hands together, excited.

“Aww, they’re so cute!” I gasped. “How is she? How are they? Have they got names yet? Oh gosh, look at their little hands and their cute scrunchy faces!”

“See?” Todd scoffed, earning a sharp elbow from Carter. “What? She’s been baby crazy for years. It’s ridiculous.”

I glanced up from the phone and scowled at my brother. “You’re the one that’s been engaged for three years. If anyone should be baby crazy it’s you.”

“Natalie doesn’t want kids,” Todd replied but his words weren’t exactly filled with confidence. I rolled my eyes and

turned back to Isaac who waited patiently for my attention to return.

“Amy is doing fine. She’s happy and healthy. So are the twins. No names yet,” he recited, and I chuckled softly, nudging into his shoulder.

“Send her my love?”

“I will.”

Todd was right though; that was the annoying part about my brother. I had yearned for a baby for *years*. Family was the most important thing in my life ever since our parents passed and Todd had to take custody of me in my later teen years to prevent the foster system from snapping me up. The gratitude I felt for that was never-ending, and as the years ticked by, the urge for my own family had only continued to grow.

Baby fever had a grip on me and it wasn’t letting go.

“Aren’t you missing one important thing?” Ren asked, wiping his hands off on a napkin and checking his watch.

“Huh?” I glanced across the table, checking the demolished remains of the food after five men had stormed through it all like a hurricane. I’d included all their favorites, I was sure of it.

“For baby-making,” Ren continued. “Don’t you need a partner for that?”

I snorted softly and turned, pointing straight toward my brother who lifted his brow in faux innocence.

“I don’t *need* a partner. Besides, if Todd wasn’t so arrogantly overprotective, maybe someone I was interested in would last five minutes, but he always scares them away.”

“Bullshit,” Todd remarked as he chewed. “You just choose shitty guys.”

“You’ve hated *everyone* I’ve dated.”

“Exactly, you choose shitty guys.”

“See?” I turned back to Ren who chuckled behind his hand. “He’s impossible. Scares everyone away. Besides, I

don't need a man to be happy. Or to have a baby.”

“Sure helps though, right?” Ren smirked, but before I could respond his pager beeped into life. Glancing at his belt, his face twisted into a grimace. “Sorry, I gotta go.”

“Go, go!”

Ren was a lead trauma surgeon; when he had to go, he *really* had to go. A quick kiss on the cheek and Ren sprinted from the room.

And just like that, the few snatched minutes where everyone was in the same room sharing a meal and having a good time was over. Pagers beeped and phones rang, dragging my brother and each of his friends back into the rollercoaster of Silverwood General Hospital. Hugs were offered, cheeks were kissed, and goodbyes uttered until it was only Dylan and I left.

“Thank you for this,” Dylan smiled, squeezing my shoulder as I gathered up the plates.

“Of course. It's the least I can do when you're all working so hard to save lives,” I replied. “Your birthday is important.”

“No one ever celebrated it until you came alone,” he chuckled, and his lips pressed lightly to my cheek. “Thank you.”

“Anytime. Leftovers will be in the fridge, but I can't promise how long they will last without me to guard them.”

“Understood.”

Then Dylan was gone, leaving me to the silence of the staff room. It was almost deafening after the rush of noise and warmth from the guys, but I was more than used to it by now. Ever since my brother had gotten into medical school, this was his life. The people he met all shared his warmth and passion for life, and if I could contribute by making sure they felt celebrated and loved, then I was satisfied.

Cleaning up the table took less time than I expected, and as I stored the leftovers in the fridge, I hesitated with the cake. After a moment, I cut the cake into small squares and pressed

a few slices into each leftover tin foil container. Lids secured, I slipped the cake into each of their lockers, with extra slices for Dylan, and closed the doors with a satisfied smile.

That was the easiest way to ensure anyone scouring the fridge for a snack didn't take the best pieces.

Sending a text to Todd to let him know I was leaving, I left Silverwood General Hospital behind and took the bus back across town to my apartment. It wasn't the coziest of places; the building was a little rundown from the outside with some water damage along the top apartment that had never been fixed and continued to cause all residents issues every time it rained. There was no point bringing it up to the landlord though. He never listened.

No sooner had I slid my key into the lock than the love of my life made herself known on the other side of the door with a series of sharp barks and soft whines.

"Whiskey!" I called through the door. "Sit!"

The audible thump of her butt hitting the floor drew a bubble of laughter and I opened the door. Whiskey's gorgeous caramel and white face came into view, and she barked once more, her tail thumping furiously against the floor. Adopting a King Charles spaniel was the best decision I had ever made. With the door closed and the lock secured, I turned to her and dropped my bags.

"Whiskey!"

Whiskey launched herself at me, barking and yelping as I bundled her into my arms, tossed my keys on the shell holder by the door, and gathered my mail. Her frantic tail thumped against my stomach, and her over-eager tongue did an excellent job of removing the makeup on the left-hand side of my face.

"Okay girl, I wasn't gone for that long!" Not that I minded, and slowly I headed into the kitchen. Placing Whiskey on the counter, I flicked on the kettle for some tea and flipped through my mail with half an eye. Something caught my

attention between the takeout menus, advertisements, and credit card offers.

A letter with the Silverwood General logo on the top corner. Everything else faded into the background as I dropped all letters except this one. I ripped open the envelope as my heart started pounding.

All the light and warmth from the earlier party fizzled out in an instant, and a cold shroud descended over my shoulders as I read and re-read the letter.

It was from my ob-gyn.

And it wasn't good news.

LOUISE

“Comfortable?”

Such a question didn't seem to have an honest answer. Laid out on my back with my ankles in stirrups while Dr. Hilda Berry worked her magic between my legs; *comfortable* was not the word I would use. Being exposed in front of a stranger while she examined every inch of me was extremely *uncomfortable*. Still, to her credit, she was only doing her job.

I swallowed hard and re-mapped the light brown stain on the ceiling tile above me as chilled lubed fingers slid inside me.

“Louise?”

“Yes, yes. Everything is peachy,” I said, my voice strained.

The fingers were removed, and the speculum's cold, hard metal press followed. My hips reacted immediately, contracting away from the intrusion and a flurry of tension washed through all my muscles, ending in me clenching my teeth as my heart started to pound harder.

“Relax for me?” Hilda asked. I rolled my eyes, relieved she couldn't see me, and fought to relax my body against the cold intrusion, but it was an impossible task.

“This is me relaxed,” I tried, and the subsequent press of the speculum drew a surprised yelp from my throat as a sudden sharp pain stabbed through my core. “Ow!”

“That's why I need you to relax,” Hilda tutted softly.

“Oh, I’m sorry, being penetrated by a metallic *medieval* torture device is supposed to make me relaxed?” I laughed through clenched teeth. “My bad, let me just...” I grunted, adjusting myself on the table. Hilda chuckled and the sheet covering my modesty was pulled further down my thighs.

“I know, I’m sorry. One day someone will invent something that makes all this so much easier for those with vaginas, but until then, it’s medieval torture all the way.” Hilda shuffled on her stool and scooted around until she was next to me.

I rolled my head to look at her, studying her auburn curls as they draped over her freckled forehead and sat atop her glasses. Her head stayed down as she scribbled on the clipboard in front of her, and each scratch of her pen heightened the warm twist of anxiety in my chest.

“So... is everything looking good? Pussy all healthy?”

Hilda’s head snapped up as she laughed, her cheeks slightly pink. “Physically, yes, everything is good. You’re happy and healthy down there. But...” Her tongue tapped against her upper teeth, and her cheery smile suddenly melted into the soft, sad smile of bad news. I’d seen my brother make that face a thousand times.

I’d sat across from that face as it told me my parents had died in a car crash.

It was the face of *I’m sorry to tell you this*.

“Louise, your determination to get pregnant is admirable.”

Oh no.

“But your recent round of test results have come back, and I’m sorry to say—”

“I’m infertile?” I blurted out suddenly, cutting her off. Prickling heat washed across my shoulders and stole down my spine as my heart raced. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No,” Hilda shook her head, “not exactly. Your eggs are what we like to call sleepy, in that they require a lot more loving when it comes to combining with sperm. But not only

that... I'm afraid your egg count is incredibly low for a woman of your age."

Hilda was talking in slow motion, each word sinking painfully into my soul as the truth made itself known. She could give me a hundred reasons, but it wouldn't change the one glaring thing I was clinging to; pregnancy would be near impossible.

"I'm only twenty-eight," I finally said. "There has to be some kind of mistake."

"I know it's not easy to hear." Hilda kept up that sweet, sympathetic voice, but all it did was fuel the irritation in my gut. A restless warmth rose in me, making the paper sheet impossibly itchy against my bare thighs and the cool leather of the table suddenly incredibly hard.

"No, it's a mistake," I insisted. "You have to test me again."

"Louise, we've done the tests multiple times at your previous request and the results are the same. I'm *sorry*, but as it stands, you will not be able to achieve pregnancy through natural means, and the aid we provided in your last session hasn't changed that."

"It's impossible?" Tears gently filled my eyes, making my vision swim as Hilda reached over to take my hand.

"We don't like to use that word," Hilda said softly, "but unfortunately, the chances are so low that they are what we consider to be non-viable."

"Fuck." I let my head fall back onto the bed and turned my blurred vision back to the stain on the ceiling. "At least I can have a one-night stand without worrying, right?"

"I know this is a terrible disappointment," Hilda said gently, "but there are options. Your journey to have a baby doesn't necessarily have to stop here."

My head snapped up. "What?"

"You should take some time, process what I've told you today, and in a few weeks, maybe we can reconvene—"

“No, tell me now.” Hilda sat there and told me I barely had any eggs left, that my chances for a baby were *basically* zilch. I wasn’t going to let her go until she told me everything. “What other options?”

“Well...” Hilda set the clipboard on her knee and clasped her hands over the top. “There are other medically enhanced means in which you could try for a child, but these... these trials are very mentally and emotionally taxing for couples, not to mention that you are by yourself. But IVF is definitely an option for you in the long run.”

“IVF,” I repeated softly, “where you use the syringe and —” I mimicked the motion with my hands and pursed my lips together for a spurting sound, drawing a slight smile from Hilda.

“In a way, yes,” she nodded. “But Louise, these treatments are—”

“I want it.”

“You should take some time, go home, and process before you make any rash decisions. Full rounds of IVF are expensive —”

“This isn’t rash,” I snapped. “I’ve wanted a baby for *years*. I’ve had to face boyfriends and my brother and countless other people who act like I’m crazy for wanting a baby, for wanting to start a family. But I am twenty-eight and that urge hasn’t died down in years. Man or no man, this is what I want. I will be—” Emotion swelled suddenly and clogged my throat so I placed my hand on my sternum. “Believe me, I have thought about this.”

Hilda studied me over the top of her glasses for a few moments, and then she leaned behind herself and grabbed the box of tissues off the counter. Pulling a few free, she passed them to me and stood.

“We have an ob-gyn here that specializes in reproductive endocrinology and infertility. I’ll see if I can get them to speak to you,” she said, “but I must stress that time to process is important.”

“I know what I want,” I insisted, and Hilda smiled politely at me.

“Don’t go anywhere.”

“Where can I go?!” I indicated to my legs still raised in the stirrups and Hilda chuckled as she pulled the curtain around the bed, then quickly excused herself from the room.

Silence fell, and with it, my heart. The moment I had seen that letter, I’d known deep down in my gut that it was bad news. Everywhere I turned, I was faced with judgment and quiet mutters about how I didn’t know what I wanted or what I was doing. Those who judged me for my bigger size always presumed my desire for a child was due to my inability to get a man, but I had never had a problem in that area. I was beautiful and confident, and I took pride in my curvaceous figure. I *owned* it. Just like I owned my desire for a family that had burned deep inside me since my early twenties.

I was just tired of waiting for the perfect man. That and finding one Todd approved of was far too much effort.

Now, here I was with my ankles in the air facing the latest hurdle getting between me and my dream only this time it wasn’t judgment or whispers. It was biology. My own body was fighting against my desire.

Alone in the examination room, keeping the tears at bay was difficult. The image I painted of myself was often the truth, but when I’d become known as Todd’s bubbly, happy little sister, it was painful to let that mask slip in public. Not just because all of Todd’s friends were insanely attractive, but his over-protectiveness made it difficult for anyone to take me seriously as a woman.

And now the thing I yearned for the most was teetering on the verdict of this specialist and the minimal savings in my bank account.

The tears came hot and thick, and I tried to blink them away, staring upward and dabbing at my undereye with my pinky fingers to catch any stray ones. But as soon as one escaped down my cheek, the rest followed like lemmings, and

I sobbed softly into my hands. It didn't feel like a big ask to have a baby. I had a lot of love to give, and this taped-together family I had created with Todd and his friends had only spurred me on further to start a family of my own. A constant ache in my chest existed in the background most days like a shadow in the corner of my eye. On days like today, that shadow swelled and threatened to consume me.

I never asked for much. I couldn't. I put my head down, I worked hard at the beauty parlor, I took care of my dog and my brother, and I kept a smile on my face.

All I wanted was a baby.

The door clicked, followed by the subtle creak of the hinge and I gathered all the mascara-stained tissues and swamped them to my eyes, trying to catch all the leaking makeup and tears before I faced down the next doctor.

“Ma’am?” came a muffled voice on the other side of the curtain. “My apologies, normally I wouldn’t speak with a patient without having booked an appointment, but Dr. Berry explained your situation and I have a few moments free for a consultation, if you agree?”

“Yes!” I called, sniffing fiercely and trying to wipe my face. “I agree.”

The curtain swept back, metallic rings scraping across the metal pole above, and the doctor stepped forward. He lifted his head, and I dropped my tissues, trying to fix a polite smile on my face when I caught the doctor’s eye.

His cheeks flared red and my heart dropped right out of my ass.

“Isaac?!”

“Louise!”

End of preview. [Get the entire story here.](#)

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