



CHRISTMAS
WITH MY BEST
FRIEND'S DAD

FIXER BROTHERS CONSTRUCTION CO.

— A HOLIDAY STORY —

RALEIGH RUEBINS

CHRISTMAS WITH MY BEST FRIEND'S DAD

A HOLIDAY NOVELLA

THE FIXER BROTHERS

BOOK 4

RALEIGH RUEBINS

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Cover by Cate Ashwood

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CASEY

In my defense, the night I slept with my best friend's dad, I didn't *know* he was my best friend's dad.

Not at first, at least. I'm not a monster.

It all started in my kitchen, where I was running my mouth way too much to the Fixer Brothers Construction crew.

"All I'm saying is that it's December, and I need cock," I said. "Christmas cock. Now more than ever."

I bit my lip as soon as I'd said it, wishing I could shove the words back in my mouth. We'd been talking nicely and innocently about how much we enjoyed Christmas, and now I'd gone and brought up how desperate I was for dick.

Typical.

I glanced around the kitchen at Charlie, Nathan, and Shawn, the three very professional construction workers who were just starting in on my small kitchen renovation. Without missing a beat, though, one of them let out a whistle, and everyone cracked up.

"Oh, thank God you guys laughed," I said, relaxing against my kitchen table. "I regretted what I said the moment I said it. Let's talk about the weather, instead. How about that snow, huh?"

"Christmas cock? More like December dick," Nathan joked, breezing right past my attempt to change the subject.

"Santa schlong," Charlie added with a snicker.

“Holiday hog,” Shawn added.

“Winter wang. Present penis. Merry member. The Gift of girth,” Charlie said, smiling wide now. “I could go on *forever*.”

Relief flooded through me. I’d been working for the Fixer Brothers for a few months, after they’d hired me to do an overhaul of their website and online marketing—and now I’d hired *them* to do some work on my place. I’d already been friendly with the guys, but I certainly hadn’t talked to them about how badly I needed cock before. We’d been all business up until this point.

But anyone who talked about *the gift of girth*, I could consider a friend.

“I knew I liked you guys,” I said. “Maybe when I finalize the code for the Fixer Brothers website overhaul, I should add in a note that each home renovation comes with free dick jokes, too.”

“If the customer wants them, of course,” Nathan said from above the tile saw that was currently stationed at the edge of my kitchen. “I say we go deeper. Tell us more about your Christmas cock needs, Casey. We all need a little dick sometimes, right? Whether we’re giving it or getting it?”

“Ignore him,” Charlie told me, waving a hand toward Nathan. “He thought he was straight until he met Kace Tomlin and now he’s ga-ga for football player dick.”

“Just because I came out later in life doesn’t mean I don’t get it,” Nathan protested. “I’ve learned a *lot* of new things since dating Kace.”

“Say no more. I get it,” I said. “I usually go for older men myself, but Kace Tomlin is the hottest pro football player I’ve ever seen. You’re a lucky man.”

“I really am,” Nathan said, a dreamy smile landing on his face.

Each of the guys had white work T-shirts on, printed with their Fixer Brothers Construction Co company logo. When I’d gotten an email from them a few months back, seeking out a

website developer, I'd jumped at the chance. Hell, I'd leaped on it like a ravenous lion. The Fixer Brothers were a huge deal, lately—not only were they an independently owned small business here in Colorado, but they'd also recently gotten their own home renovation TV show.

I was 23. I sure as shit didn't have much money saved yet. I'd recently bought this little mountain shack house that was in need of about a thousand repairs, and all I could afford now was getting the grimy old tile backsplash replaced, getting a few light fixtures installed, and repairing a piece of the concrete foundation behind the stove.

Nothing glamorous. But owning a house at all at age 23 made me feel like a king, and I was determined to take goddamn good care of this place for years to come.

“Christmas cock,” Charlie said, glancing up at me and wiping at his brow with the back of his tattooed arm. “Say no more. Every time the holidays hit, I start to get this craving for it. The cold air, the snow, cozy fires, and the desperate need to get railed.”

I hummed. “You get it. Clearly.”

“Do you have any hookups in mind around town?” he asked me.

I shook my head. “I'm a nerd who codes websites. I work from home. *And* I'm new in town,” I said. “I have no prospects right now.”

Shawn and Nathan were the brother duo that owned Fixer Brothers Construction, and Charlie was their right-hand man.

“You don't seem that nerdy to me,” Charlie said, grinning at me. “Do nerds usually look like James Dean and say phrases like *I need Christmas cock?*”

“You'd be surprised,” I said. “Who says nerds don't crave big, strong Daddy types? The kind who could boss me around and then fuck me afterward as a consolation prize?”

“You sound just like Kace did when I first met him,” Nathan told me. “I'm glad there are young guys out there who appreciate us old men.”

Shawn rolled his eyes. “You are not *old*. You’re 37.”

“I feel like I’ve been old since the moment I had a kid,” Nathan joked. “But thank you.”

“It’s just a fantasy I’ve never fulfilled,” I admitted. “I’ve never gotten to be with a guy who’s even a *year* older than me, let alone much older. It’s all I want, sometimes. A guy with wisdom and knowledge and experience in all the right ways...”

Charlie groaned. “Okay, now you have to stop,” he said, “not because you’ve gone too far, but because you’re making me drool. I need to see my boyfriend. He’s young, but *very* wise—”

Shawn snorted. “Charlie, you and Jax have been glued together since you admitted you’re in love. You have that desperate need to get railed every month of the year. Every week of the year.”

“Every second of every day,” Nathan added.

“Yeah, but something about the twinkly lights just makes me want to guzzle his cum even more—”

“Charlie, for God’s sake,” Shawn said. He looked over at me. “I’m sorry, Casey, we’re usually a lot more professional than this.”

I held up my hands. “Please, say more. Nothing like a side of filth with my new backsplash.”

A slow, creeping envy filled my chest, though. I loved that the guys were open to talking about stuff, but I also desperately wanted what they had. All three of them were happy with their partners, and I had nobody to keep me warm this winter.

I’d gotten used to being lonely, though. I’d set up my Christmas tree alone a few days ago. This week, I would hang my Christmas lights on the front of my house on my own.

Maybe, someday, I’d have love like the Fixer Brothers seemed to have found.

For now, I only had one mission: to find that elusive Christmas cock. Hopefully on an older guy who could put me in my place.

* * *

The real trouble started when the guys offered to bring me along to their favorite brewery that night—where I met the man that, I swear, I did *not* know was my best friend’s dad.

“Casey, we’re going to head to Jade Brewery,” Charlie said after the guys had cleaned up my kitchen for the evening. “You’re more than welcome to come along. Can’t promise any hookups, but I can guarantee I’ll beat you in a round of pool.”

“God, yes,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

We headed out into the cold December evening around six o’clock. Our breath was visible in the air as we walked and talked during the short few blocks to Spruce Street at the heart of the town, yesterday’s snowfall crunching under our boots. Spruce Street was full of mom-and-pop shops, small businesses, and cobblestone walkways, and right now, it looked like a winter wonderland, dusted with white.

Talking with the Fixer Brothers guys rekindled a feeling inside me that I hadn’t realized I’d been missing: good, old-fashioned friendship. I’d been needing it since moving up here to the mountains—because *goddamn*, I missed my best friend. Ever since Justin had started traveling a ton for work, we barely got to see each other.

“Look at that,” Nathan said, pointing as the four of us walked toward the brewery. “They’re putting up all of the wintertime decorations.”

“Holy shit, they really go all out here, don’t they?” I said.

All around Spruce Street, a huge crew of people were busy hanging up tons of glowy string lights, wreaths, garlands, and occasional ornaments. At the edge of the small bridge near the center of the town square, more people were setting up a tall Christmas tree.

And of course, my eyes landed on the very hot, very buff men who were hanging a string of lights right on the awning of Jade Brewery.

One man in particular.

A man who was every bit the strong, mountain-Daddy fantasy that I went fucking *crazy* for.

He had to be in his early forties at least. Even under the dim light of the Christmas lights, I could see that he had some salt-and-pepper greying going on in his hair, and he was wearing fitted jeans and a red plaid flannel over a white T-shirt.

He turned to grab another section of lights from beside him and briefly met my eyes, smiling in a way that made the sides of his eyes crinkle up. *God*, those eyes. Kind eyes. Hazel green. And yet somehow also electric, like his expression had a spark to it.

It made my cock perk up instantly.

“Pretty magical,” I said, my eyes still trained on him as he reached upward to nail in another portion of the string lights.

“Want to give me a hand, or are you just here for the view?” the man said, glancing back down at me with one eyebrow raised.

Shit. Was my staring that obvious? “Oh, I’m sorry—” I said, feeling heat creep up to my cheeks.

“No, no,” he said, seemingly amused. “Look all you want. That’s what the decorations are for, right?”

I couldn’t tell if he was flirting with me or fucking with me, but whatever it was, it was working.

He started to walk down the ladder, taking each step slowly, which accentuated how perfect his ass looked in his jeans. Even when he got down to the ground, he still towered over me. He had to be at least six foot two, maybe taller.

He didn’t just look like a hot-dad type. He looked like the *hottest* hot-dad type I’d ever seen. I already wanted him to toss

me over his shoulder and show me what he could do with that body.

Charlie, Nathan, and Shawn had walked inside the brewery already, probably not realizing I'd gotten distracted. I was the only one left out here, watching this guy while a few of his coworkers were hanging other decorations at the edges of the wooden deck across the way.

"I've only lived here for a little while, but this is the best Spruce Street has ever looked," I said to the guy.

"That's my job. I'm Rome, by the way," he said, reaching out to shake my hand. "My company's called Colorado Cheer. Nobody does seasonal decorations like us."

"I'm Casey," I said. "And shit. If I'd known I could do *that* for work, I'd never have become a website designer."

Rome smiled, his face glowing under the twinkly lights. "No. You did the right thing," he said, and I could tell he meant it. "My son is a tech whiz, too. His company has him flying all over the country, doing computer work for huge corporations. He's going further than I ever did."

Bingo.

He didn't just look the part. He was a dad, and clearly a loving one, too. He sounded so genuinely proud of his son. My heart warmed. The guy wasn't just hot as fuck, he was sweet, too.

"I can tell you're proud of him," I said. "My best friend does the same thing for work, actually. It's disgusting how much they pay him."

Rome laughed, a deep, rich sound. "Exactly. Sounds like your friend is a lot like my son."

I bit my lip. I couldn't keep my eyes from wandering down to Rome's plush lips, then further toward the outlines of his pecs showing through his T-shirt. I was sure that I looked like a drooling animal right about now, but another part of me didn't care.

Rome was the hottest guy I'd fucking seen in months. Maybe even *years*. And I couldn't resist an opportunity to shoot my shot with him.

"So you're a hot, hardworking dad who literally brings Christmas cheer to towns all over Colorado," I said. "You sound too perfect. What are you hiding?"

His eyes met mine, smoldering again.

"I'm almost done with work for tonight," he said. "Why don't I buy you a drink and we can find out?"

ROME

It wasn't every day that I hit on guys who were nearly half my age. Hell, these days, I didn't really hit on anyone much at all.

But when Casey looked at me like he'd do anything for me, I couldn't stop myself. I was only human.

Life had been nothing but work, work, and more work, lately, and I was tired to my bones. I was grateful for the holiday season, when my little company got the bulk of its action, hanging Christmas decorations all over Denver and small towns nearby. But it also meant long days, sometimes stretching from six in the morning 'til eight at night.

I was craving a pick-me-up more than ever.

"I thought you must have been here with one of those guys," I said as we walked into Jade Brewery, nodding toward the three construction workers that Casey had arrived with.

"None of those beautiful men are mine," Casey said, waving a hand. "Those guys are the Fixer Brothers. I'm doing an overhaul on their website, and they're doing a little renovation work on my kitchen."

"And that would stop you from hooking up with one of them?" I joked.

His eyes glinted as he looked back at me. "It's like you know exactly how shameless I am already," he said.

His dark hair looked so soft, and just long enough on top to be perfectly tuggable. *Fuck*, everything about him was

drawing me in. He was way younger than the guys I usually went for, but right now, I didn't really give a damn.

Because he wanted me.

It was *so* damn obvious that he wanted me, from the moment he'd laid eyes on me.

And after going through a bit of a dry spell for a while, having someone look at me like he wanted to devour me felt pretty good. Even more so, now that we were in the warm lighting of the bar area, where I could see the pale blue of his eyes.

Goddamn, it had been too long since I'd had a little fun.

"Maybe I like shameless," I murmured as we continued over toward the bar.

"You've come to the right place."

Already, I felt at home at Jade Brewery. The outside looked like a big log cabin. Inside was wood, wood, and more wood, which was fine with me. One side of the building was lined with giant metal brewing tanks, and the other side was a long oak-top bar that felt both cozy yet big enough to have a real party if needed. Tables and chairs filled the rest of the space, with areas for pool tables by the back and a couple of old Skee-Ball machines along one wall.

And as a certified holiday decorations expert, I gave the Jade Brewery crew an A+ for effort on their indoor decor. Big pine wreaths were hung up behind the bar, with more green pine garland hanging above it. Multicolored lights wrapped around any and every pole in here, and dotted the underside of the bar.

"None of the guys from Fixer Brothers are *my* type, anyway," Casey said. We sat down on two barstools, the wood creaking a little as we settled in.

"And what is your type?" I asked him.

He shrugged one shoulder. "Older guys," Casey said, meeting my gaze again as he turned toward me, leaning one elbow on the wooden bar top.

My cock couldn't resist him. I was already feeling it harden under my jeans, in a way that hadn't been a problem for me in a long time.

"One of 'em looks like he's about my age," I offered.

"Yeah, but he's dating Kace Tomlin," Casey said.

"Wow. Pro footballer action."

"Exactly."

I pulled in a slow breath, letting my eyes linger on Casey's lips. "So you like older men? What kind, exactly?"

"Guys with some salt and pepper in their hair. Guys who look rough, but kind. Guys who are willing to take me into a bar and buy me a drink even though I'm young enough to be their son."

I groaned, leaning back in my chair and holding eye contact with him. He looked like an angel, with the faint multicolored glow of the twinkly lights highlighting his face, but I knew he was trouble.

The fucker was trying to make me crazy.

"You probably are about the same age as my son," I told him. "What are you, 24? 25?"

"23," he replied, and I had to groan again.

"Yep," I said, nodding. "You're his age. And I'm officially a monster."

"What?" Casey protested. "Why do you say that?"

I lifted an eyebrow. "Because I feel guilty finding someone as young as you so goddamn attractive," I told him, my voice low. "But I do."

His eyes widened, just for an instant, as something flashed through them. He reached out, gently resting his hand on my forearm and giving it a little squeeze.

He liked this.

The fucker *liked* that he was twisting my whole body into knots, knowing I was reeling hearing his actual age.

“Well, Rome,” he said, “you haven’t even bought me a drink yet. Maybe nothing will happen between us, and you won’t have to feel guilty.”

I snorted a laugh. “Oh yeah? Are we just going to be friends, Casey?”

He shrugged one shoulder, acting innocent. “If you enjoy having friends who want to kiss you, then worship your cock, then kiss you some more? Then sure.”

My cock throbbed now, going from half-hard to fully erect as Casey looked at me like he was ready to pounce on me.

And I couldn’t resist.

I’d been *so good* at resisting, up until now. But when he talked to me like that, there was really only one reasonable response.

I leaned over on my chair, touching the side of his face with my hand. I reached up a little higher as I leaned in, letting my fingertips move through his soft hair.

He made a soft moan as I came closer, and his pupils widened. Christ, he was even better looking this close up.

I pressed my lips to his in a kiss. And every nerve ending in my body lit up.

I didn’t hesitate. I didn’t waver. I didn’t know him very well, but I knew he wanted this just as badly as I did. As his lips parted for me, his tongue slid out against mine in a rush of wet heat.

We kissed like we *had* already fucked. Not like we were just strangers, being nice and sweet to each other in a bar.

My cock was hard as a fucking rock as I felt his tongue on mine. He gently bit down on my lower lip, giving it a little tug. *Christ*. I felt a little out of control with him, like if I didn’t watch out I was going to start rutting up against him. Grind on him in public like some sort of frenzied animal.

I pulled away. Casey looked blissed out, almost drunk even though we hadn’t even had a drink yet. His eyes were half-

lidded. He couldn't believe I'd just done that, and I kind of couldn't believe it, either.

"I... think I'm going to like being *friends* with you," he murmured.

I gently dropped my hand, letting it slide across the top of his thigh before pulling it back.

Fucking delicious.

And I wanted so, so much more.

The swinging door behind the bar suddenly popped open, and a burly, lumberjack-looking bartender walked out, snapping me back into reality.

"Evening, gentleman," the bartender said, quickly walking up behind the bar and giving us each a nod. "Welcome to Jade Brewery. Can I get anything started for you? A sample of anything we have on tap?"

For a moment I wavered, looking at the tall, bearded bartender. He was around my age, too. Was Casey going to flirt with him instead, now, and forget all about me? Something about that kiss had made me feel possessive about Casey already, and even though I knew he was basically still a stranger, part of me wanted to claim him. Just for tonight.

"I think what I need right now is a cold shower," I joked. My whole body still felt like it was on fire from that kiss. I couldn't imagine how good it would feel to do even more with Casey. Just thinking about it made me feel like I was breaking some rule, and I wanted to break it again.

The burly bartender stared at me and blinked.

"Well, I could bring you a fresh wet towel, if you need one, sir," he said. He didn't seem like he took any shit from anyone.

"I was just kidding," I reassured him. "No wet towels necessary, but thank you. I'm Rome, by the way. It's nice to meet you."

The bartender nodded. "Sure thing. My name's Harlan."

“Oh, you’re Harlan?” Casey piped up. “Charlie mentioned something about you earlier.”

Harlan’s scowl only increased. He glanced over toward Charlie, one of the Fixer Brothers guys, who was sitting at the other end of the bar, giving another, younger bartender googly love-eyes.

“And what exactly was Charlie saying about me?” Harlan asked.

“Only good things,” Casey said. “Something about how cute you are with your best friend, I think.”

“Oh,” Harlan said. His scowl melted away. “He was talking about me and Sawyer.”

“Yes,” Casey said, snapping his fingers. “He said he thinks you’re going to end up in love with Sawyer. I think he said you two used to work on a farm together, right?”

“Charlie lives in a fantasy land, where everyone falls in love,” Harlan said. “But yes, Sawyer’s my best friend. And he’s supposed to get here soon with a fresh batch of lavender buds for one of our experimental hazy brews. So can I please get you two something to drink, sooner rather than later?”

“Yes. Right. Sorry,” I offered. “I think I’ll be happy with a pint of your winter IPA.”

“And I’ll take a margarita,” Casey said.

Harlan had our drinks out a minute later, and I relished the first cold, foamy sip of my IPA. Apparently Jade Brewery wasn’t just good for ambience—it was fucking *great* for beer, too.

I looked over at Casey, finally feeling like I was regaining some sense of sanity.

“You want to know how I knew I liked you?” I said softly, watching him take a swig of his margarita.

He swallowed. “So you like me? I thought maybe I’d turned you off when I told you my age.”

“You certainly haven’t turned me *off* in any way, at any point,” I said. “I don’t think that would be possible.”

There were so many things I wanted to say to him, but I knew I probably shouldn’t.

I wanted to tell him that flirting with him tonight so far had already been one of the most fun things I’d done in months.

That I wanted to lean over right about now and pull him into a kiss.

That really, if I had my way, I’d already have him pushed up against a wall in the bathroom, moaning my name.

“Because you saw me,” I said simply.

He cocked his head to one side, his eyes glinting. “What do you mean?”

I pulled in a long breath, leaning back in my chair. “Sometimes I can feel invisible, these days,” I said. “People see all of the decorations we put up, and they stop to take photos under them. If they see us installing the stuff, they usually ignore us. We’re just workers, to most people. I certainly don’t usually get young, hot guys staring at my ass.”

He smiled, but there was a sadness behind his eyes, too. “I can’t believe that’s true, though,” he said. “Who wouldn’t notice *you*?”

Fuck. He got me in my dick *and* my heart? I was screwed.

“See?” I said, clicking tongue. “That’s how I knew I liked you.”

* * *

Casey and I sipped our drinks slowly. I could tell that neither of us wanted this night to end, and with every passing minute I felt like I was drawn further into some sort of spell.

“What kind of work are you getting done on your house?” I asked him.

“Small stuff,” he said. “Just a couple of things in the kitchen, mostly. Here, let me show you.”

He pulled out his phone, swiping over to some photos of his kitchen backsplash. It was old and yellowed, with crumbling tiles and ancient grout. He showed me the tiles he’d picked out for the new backsplash, which were a creamy speckled white, sleek and classic.

“You’ve got a good eye for this stuff.”

“I can only afford the backsplash right now, but it’s going to change the vibe of the whole space.”

He cradled his phone as he swiped through some mock-up images of what the finished backsplash would look like. As he was flipping through them, a banner for a new text message flashed at the top of the screen.

>>*Mom: I mean, look how good he looks! Absolutely fucking perfect for you, huh?*

The message was followed quickly by a tiny preview of an image of a young man, dressed in mint green doctor’s scrubs.

Casey grimaced, looking up at me before sliding his phone over.

“You totally saw that, didn’t you?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“Shit, man,” Casey said. Pink slashes appeared on his cheeks, and the sight of him blushing was somehow even cuter than when he had been all cocky and confident toward me.

“Your mom likes setting you up with guys, huh?”

He rubbed his fingers over the bridge of his nose, nodding. “She’s particularly hell-bent on setting me up with this guy Derek. He’s the son of one of her friends, and when she found out that he was not only gay, but *in medical school*, she went nuts with it.”

“Adorable.”

“Not adorable,” I said. “I’m 23. I don’t need my mother trying to arrange blind dates for me.”

I took a long sip of my beer. “I’d have killed to have that kind of support from my mom when I was your age.”

Casey pocketed his phone, furrowing his brow as he looked over at me. “What happened?”

“My mom only wanted me to end up with one kind of person: a woman,” I said.

“Yikes.”

“And so I *did* end up with a woman,” I said. “For five years. Married her, even, after we got pregnant when we were barely 20 years old.”

“Wow,” Casey said. “I knew you had a son, but still. That’s so young.”

“Didn’t even seem that young, back then,” I said. “Hell, my own parents had me at 20, too. I just thought I was doing the right thing. And I loved Melissa, too.”

“Then you realized you preferred men?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “No. Then I realized *she* preferred other men.”

“Oh, God.”

“One man, in particular,” I told him. “I always knew I liked both women and men, but I was prepared to spend the rest of my life with Melissa, until she met the man she’s still married to now.”

“I’m so sorry,” Casey said.

Immediately, I wanted to erase the look he had in his eyes now—it was something between sadness and pity, and whatever it was, I really didn’t want him to feel that way toward me.

“All for the best,” I said. “I was young, stupid, and had no career prospects. Her husband now owns three very successful corporate buildings in Denver. Melissa and I both love and care for our son, and that’s the only thing that matters.”

Thankfully, he was giving me that dreamy, starry-eyed look again, rather than looking like he felt bad for me.

“You have such an interesting life story,” Casey murmured. “That’s just another reason I like older guys. My own life story so far is just school, college, and now working from home as a website designer.”

I grinned at him. “And, apparently, prospects with a very attractive young doctor.”

Casey groaned, leaning back. “I was hoping you’d forgotten about that.”

“What’s so wrong with Mr. Medical Student? Maybe you should give him a chance,” I teased him.

He waved a hand through the air. “That guy wouldn’t be able to handle me.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Casey shook his head, then met my eyes again. “No. I’m too much.”

“Too much, how?”

He bit his lower lip, and just the sight of it made me crave having his teeth biting on *my* lip again instead.

“Like, I want someone who can put me in my place,” he said. “Not always, but when the time is right, you know? Someone who calls me on my bullshit. Who knows that what I *really* want, deep down, is... complicated.”

I cocked my head to one side. “You want someone to boss you around a little, Casey?”

I fucking loved the way it made him look at me.

“Little bit,” he said, his voice low.

CASEY

I was royally fucked.

I'd flirted with guys before at bars. Plenty of times. But it had *never* been like this.

When Rome had dragged me into that kiss earlier, I'd been half convinced that I could have come right then and there into my pants. I was already all worked up, managing the state of my hard-on all night.

But when he looked at me with those kind, hazel eyes, and asked me in a deep voice if I *wanted someone to boss me around?*

Yep. Fucked. I was totally fucked.

And so hard under my jeans that it was starting to hurt.

I swallowed. I was trying to maintain my composure on the outside, not giving away the fact that I was already dying for him to do whatever he wanted to me.

"Sometimes I want someone to tell me what to do, yes," I told him. "And sometimes I want to tell someone else what to do, too."

Rome hummed. "I'm starting to think you were made to drive me insane," he said. "And that you're reading my mind. And you know exactly what turns me the fuck on."

Now it was my turn to tease him right back. "I thought you said I was too young for you?"

“I think I don’t care anymore,” he said, his voice a low purr. “Or, maybe I’m starting to like it.”

“*Damn*,” I whispered, shifting in my chair to try to get my dick into a slightly more comfortable position.

“Come over here and kiss me again.”

The inside of my chest went molten. “Who says I want to kiss you again?” I bluffed, knowing he’d catch that bluff in two seconds flat.

“*You* say it,” he told me, calmly and confidently. “With your eyes. With every word you’ve said to me since you saw me. With that thick bulge at the front of your pants.”

I sucked in air. “Like you don’t have a bulge, too?”

“Kiss me,” Rome repeated.

I groaned. “I can’t.”

“Why the hell not?”

I looked around. Jade Brewery was calm, friendly, and cozy as always. Across the bar I could still see Shawn, Nathan, and Charlie, having a chat over some drinks, and Harlan was restocking bottles of cinnamon ale behind the bar.

“Because the moment your mouth is on mine again,” I said, my voice low and steady, “I’m going to want to push you onto the top of this bar and make you come. And that’s just not appropriate in public, okay?”

This earned a lopsided smile from Rome, crinkling up to his eyes again in that irresistible way.

“God, I like you,” he said.

“Then come home with me,” I offered. “I’m just a few blocks away. I know you’re curious about my backslash, right?”

I waited, wondering if I’d said too much again.

I was being *crazy*, inviting him home, right?

But he picked up his beer and tossed the rest of it back in five seconds flat. “Don’t have to ask me twice.”

Adrenaline shot through me as I attempted to finish the rest of my margarita. It had been a shot in the dark asking him to come home with me at all, and I sure as shit hadn't known whether he'd say yes or not. But soon we were tossing cash on the bar and my heart was pounding faster in my chest. I headed over toward the Fixer Brothers, thanked them for inviting me, and got words of encouragement from all of them on the hottie I was bringing home.

And then I was heading back out into the cold December night, with Rome right beside me. The rush of adrenaline had become a full-blown five-alarm fire in my body.

As we were walking down the set of wooden steps on the front patio of Jade Brewery, I stumbled on one of them, almost face planting right into a mound of snow.

Rome caught my arm.

"Whoa, whoa," he said. His firm grip was comforting on my upper arm. "You alright? I didn't think you'd had *that* much liquor in the margarita."

I took a deep breath, trying to regain composure. His face was framed by a halo of decorative lights just behind him—lights he'd hung up, himself, probably an hour ago.

He sure as shit looked like a Christmas miracle to me.

"No, it's definitely not the liquor," I said. "I don't feel drunk, I'm just freaking out."

His brow furrowed. We stopped there at the edge of the stairs, on the path that led down to the parking lot.

"Freaking out?" he said. "I don't like the sound of that."

"No, no," I said. "Freaking out in a good way. A very good way. I promise."

He lifted one eyebrow. God, how did he look so sexy even doing something as simple as *lifting an eyebrow*? I hated it. I loved it.

"You sure?" he asked me.

“Listen,” I said, “I was surprised you even looked my way when I walked up to the brewery. The fact that you’re coming home with me feels like winning the lottery. I just don’t want to fuck it all up before we even get there, like I seem to be way too good at doing.”

A gentle wind blew a lock of his hair to one side. He got a sympathetic look in his eyes, almost like he wanted to protect me somehow.

“Well, whoever you’ve ‘fucked it all up’ with must be different from me,” he said. He took a step closer to me, and I could feel the warmth of his chest near mine. “Because I’ve wanted you more every minute we’ve spent together.”

I could barely handle having those eyes on me. I let out a soft moan as his warm hand found its way to the side of my neck again, gently gliding up toward my hair.

He leaned in for another kiss. This time it was soft. Gentlemanly and polite.

He was kissing me like someone might kiss after a nice, simple first date. He was as sweet as he was sexy, apparently.

He pulled away, looking me in the eyes.

“I get the sense that you want someone to take care of you,” he said, his voice deep and velvety. “So, if you want, I would fucking *love* to take care of you tonight, Casey. No more, no less.”

“That sounds like the best thing I’ve heard in a long time,” I said softly.

He reached down to hold my hand. “Lead the way?”

For the short few blocks back to my house, I felt like a giddy teenager. Rome kept his fingers laced through mine, and the feeling of his hand in mine was more intoxicating than any alcohol could have been. As we walked, Rome pointed out every decoration that his company had put up around town, and then the other decorations, which were far inferior to his, of course. Soon the main street gave way to quieter streets full of houses and tall trees, and Rome was nothing but encouraging. He loved every type of decoration that people

put up on their homes, even if they'd only used simple strings of lights across their house.

"I can't help it," he said as we approached my house. "I'm well into my forties, and I've never gotten sick of December. People talk about the childhood magic wearing off, but it never did, for me."

"I'm the same way," I said. "It really is magical."

He gave me a playful shove with his shoulder. "Oh, shut up."

"What?"

"You're 23," he said. "Of course nothing's had the chance to wear off for you yet."

I snorted. "I'm a grown-up, goddamnit."

He reached his hand into my back pocket, giving my ass a squeeze. "I know you are."

My heart skipped a beat again as we approached my house. "Well, this is it," I said, walking up the short path to my front steps. "Home, sweet home. Don't expect much, because I'm still moving in, okay?"

As we walked inside and kicked off our boots in the entryway, my mind was running through its usual loop when I had new visitors over: I always gave a little tour of the place, asked people if they wanted a drink, and helped them feel at home. From the entryway, the medium-sized Christmas tree was visible from the edge of the living room. I'd set it up on a timer, and every night at sundown, the lights flipped on, casting the room in its glow. I loved coming home to it after dark, and it had been the first thing I'd been showing to guests.

I scratched the back of my neck. "So, um, I guess I'll show you the living room first—"

"Come here," he said as his hands caught my waist and tugged me in close.

He knew what I wanted. He knew what I *needed*.

And I realized that I wasn't going to have to worry about any of the usual niceties that I showed to other guests.

He crushed his lips to mine without a hint of hesitation. There was nothing polite about his kiss now, and that was exactly the way I liked it. We were inside, away from any onlookers, and Rome sure as hell wasn't shy.

He pushed me backward toward the wall of the entryway, pushing his hips forward against the front of my body. My back hit something soft behind me, sliding against the wall, and I realized he'd shoved me up against the new, rolled-up rug I had leaned there.

A shiver ran through my body as his palm found its way to my thigh, then slowly, firmly made its way up toward my dick, palming me through my jeans.

"Fuck," I whispered against his lips. "I didn't even turn the lights on yet. I was going to give you a grand tour and everything."

"I want a grand tour of your body," he said. "And the light from the Christmas tree is better than anything else could be."

"You're not wrong," I said. The last word came out low and breathy because Rome was dipping lower, now, slowly sucking a kiss against the side of my neck. I leaned my head back against the soft rolled-up rug, arching for him.

His hair was soft as it brushed against my jaw. My cock throbbed with every move Rome made.

Fuck, it was like nothing I'd ever felt. I'd known that I was attracted to older men for about as long as I'd been attracted to anyone, but having the real thing was different than what I had imagined. Better. His strong, slightly calloused hands on my hips. The low rumble of his voice when he hummed near my ear. The way he was making me feel small, in the best fucking way, even though I was only a few inches shorter than him.

He was every bit a man. And I already wanted to sink to my knees for him, and we'd only been inside for a minute.

He reached a hand up toward my shoulder, edging underneath my peacoat and starting to push it off. I shrugged it

off quickly, then pulled off my sweater and T-shirt.

Rome let out a groan, and his eyes danced across my bare torso. It was a little chilly in the room, and for a moment I had a flash of self-consciousness. Here I was, desperate and stripping for a man I barely knew, so ready to give myself to him. But then he took off his jacket and shirt, too, and I was too distracted to even care what the hell he might think of me.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered. “Having a body that good should be illegal.”

I had never seen someone have such a sculpted body outside of a gym before. He looked like he’d earned the body he had through years and years of hard work and physical labor, and he’d been very well rewarded with the results. I couldn’t help but reach out and run my fingertips through the soft trail of salt and pepper hair that led from his stomach down lower, tracing the planes of his muscles.

“You’re good at making a guy feel flattered,” he said as my fingers skated near the waistband of his jeans.

“No,” I said softly. “Usually I’m terrible at that. Every compliment I’ve given you is just more of a *fact*, really.”

He hummed, his eyes dancing over my face, like he was trying to make a decision. “Get on the floor.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “The floor?”

He nodded toward the living room, right beside the glow of the Christmas tree. “That rug looks comfortable. I want to see you lying down on it.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” I said, trying to make a joke but realizing that I enjoyed calling him that a little too much. I headed into the living room, the smell of the fresh pine filling the air.

The sides of our bodies brushed against the Christmas tree as he got down on the floor with me, and one of my bell ornaments let out its little jingle. He was straddling me from above now, nuzzling close into the crook of my neck and kissing my collarbone.

“I fucking needed this,” I murmured.

“I can tell.”

Under the sound of his voice, I heard a soft whirring sound coming from somewhere in the house. I couldn't pay attention to it at first because the *only* thing my brain wanted to focus on right now was the sound of Rome's breath—but soon, the whirring sound came nearer, and I realized immediately what was happening.

I turned my head to the side just as my little floor vacuum robot came whizzing up to us.

It knocked into Rome's arm, beeped, and then did a little spin on the ground.

“Oh my God,” I said, covering my face with my palm. “Shit.”

My cheeks flushed hot, but I was relieved when Rome let out a deep laugh.

“Oh, that is too funny,” Rome said, a lopsided smile on his face.

“Am I seriously being cock-blocked by my *Roomba* right now?” I protested.

“What?” Rome protested. “Give the guy a break. He just wants to make sure the place is nice and clean, right?”

“Milton definitely is a polite little robot vacuum,” I said, “but he doesn't seem to understand that when I bring home the hottest guy I've ever seen, it's *not* the time for chores—”

I reached over right as the vacuum spun around again and then launched itself forward, barreling straight into Rome's calf and banging into it over and over again.

“I didn't know we'd be having this kind of threesome tonight, little robot buddy,” Rome said, looking down at it. “But I'll try anything once, I suppose—”

I cracked up, finally reaching down and holding the reset button so that the vacuum would go off and shut itself off.

“I am so sorry,” I pleaded as it finally slowed down and headed back off across the floor to its charging station,

shutting off.

Rome gave me a pointed look, his gorgeous eyes suddenly staring into my damn soul. “Casey.”

“I know.”

“*Casey*,” he repeated, in the deep, velvety tone that felt like slipping into a warm bath.

“Yes?”

“You didn’t seriously name your vacuum Milton, did you?”

I bit my lower lip. “Milton may have been named when my cousin and her seven-year-old daughter came over to see the house a few weeks ago, but yes. I did name my robot vacuum, and I’m not ashamed to say it.”

“Fuck,” Rome murmured.

“I know. I’m ridiculous.”

“No.”

“At the very least, I’m a total fucking weirdo—”

Rome clicked his tongue. “Well, yes, but lucky for you, I really, really like weirdos.”

I leaned back on my elbows, taking a deep breath and regaining composure. I watched him closely, noticing a little dusting of freckles just beneath his eyes.

“Well, I’m sorry about Milton,” I offered.

Rome hummed. “Oh, Casey,” he purred, reaching out to stroke his fingers along my arm. “What am I going to do with you?”

“A whole lot of things, I hope,” I said. “Hopefully lots of them involving your tongue?”

“Baby. You already know me so well.”

He dipped to kiss me again right away, the wet rush of his tongue hitting mine.

Goddamn, the nerve on him. I'd never been with someone who would have the guts to call me *baby* the first time we'd ever hooked up, but that was just another reason why Rome was special. From the moment we'd met, it had felt like some small part of him really *had* known me. Something had instantly clicked—something I hadn't known had been missing from my world until tonight.

“God, I want to make you come,” I whispered against his lips as he pulled away. I rocked my hips upward, the outline of my cock rutting up against his. “Are you going to make me beg?”

He groaned, lifting up a little, his gaze meeting mine. “I wasn't going to, but now I kind of want to hear what you sound like when you're begging.”

“I have zero shame. I'll do it.”

“Try me.”

I sucked in a breath of air, looking deep into his eyes. The glow of the Christmas tree light hit one side of his face, illuminating his hair like he was in a damn painting, as some sort of Greek god.

“Please let me worship your cock,” I said to him, bringing one of my hands to the side of his face. “I want to service you. To let you fuck my mouth like... like you own me.”

“Like I own you,” he repeated softly, doing that thing again where it felt like he was looking right into my soul.

I pulled in a breath. “Yes.”

“I already have you wrapped around my finger,” he said, skating his fingertips along my skin and giving me goosebumps.

A surge of adrenaline coursed through me. I moved out from under him, pushing my body onto his so that I was straddling him.

I had no clue what I was doing. But I knew one thing: I wanted to give this man the gift of coming so hard he'd never

forget me. Even if this was a one-night thing. Even if we never spoke again after tonight.

If one day, this was just a far-flung Christmastime memory for him, I wanted it to be fucking *good*.

ROME

Holy hell in a snow-filled fucking *handbasket*, I'd never predicted my night could turn out like this.

I was the luckiest guy in Colorado, apparently.

“Good,” I murmured, marveling at Casey. “You have my permission. My cock is all yours, and I think you know that.”

Our positions were reversed now. He straddled me on the soft rug near the Christmas tree, and I lay back, letting my head rest on the soft, plush edge of the tree skirt beneath it.

It was my own little heaven. My whole field of view was the edge of a pine tree, soft twinkle lights, and then *him*. A ball of nervous, adorable, fucking *hot as hell* energy, all wrapped up in a mouthy 23-year-old.

He made quick work of my belt, undoing it quickly and reaching for my button and zipper afterward. I wanted to freeze every moment in time but also didn't dare stop him. He pulled down my pants and boxer briefs in one motion, my cock bobbing free.

Casey looked at, practically drooling.

“Oh, *fuck* you,” he said, almost looking pained as he gazed at my cock.

I leaned upward a little. “What?”

“Even your dick is perfect,” he said, shaking his head slightly, an agonized expression on his face. “It's like I

dreamed this up. I'm not dreaming right now, right? Because I'm going to be really mad if this isn't real."

"Do you really think *Milton* would have made an appearance if this was all a dream?"

Casey snorted, then let out a sigh. "Guess you're right. Can't say my vacuum makes many cameos in my dreams. But you... you are right out of them, Rome."

I sucked in a quick breath as Casey dipped low, pressing a neat row of little kisses along the top of my thigh. He wasn't kidding when he said he wanted to worship me—I'd half expected him to plunge down right onto my cock, but he was savoring everything, and taking his time.

I'd had my fair share of hookups in my adult life, but I wasn't sure I'd ever felt as *wanted* as I had in the last few hours tonight. Casey, as far as I was concerned, was my sexual Kryptonite.

I'd never thought I was into younger guys before. Hadn't really given much thought to age at all, really. I'd mostly been with people who were my age, not even considering that someone who was 23 could crave me in quite the way Casey seemed to. But now that I'd gotten a taste of it, I wanted the whole damn thing. I wanted all of him.

I groaned softly as his tongue finally hit the base of my cock. He licked a slow, wet line with the tip of his tongue, all the way to the tip of my shaft.

"Tease," I said, my voice low.

"I know I am."

My cock pulsed. When I looked down I could see a shiny bead of precum had collected at the tip, all for him. A moment later he brought his tongue up to lick it away, then sucked the tip, his lips pursed.

"There you go," I said. "More."

He hummed as he took another inch of me into his mouth, still teasing me, but giving me what I asked for.

He'd told me he liked being bossed around, but now that we were here together, I could tell he didn't just *like* it—he craved it, deeply. Every time I praised him or gave him a command, he had some kind of palpable reaction. His cock twitched. Or his cheeks got a little flush to them. Or he let out one of those quiet moans that I was starting to get addicted to already.

“Are you going to let me fuck your mouth, Casey?”

He moaned around my cock, his lips already starting to get tantalizingly sloppy. “Yes,” he said as he pulled off for just a moment. “Please.”

When he lowered down around me again I let my hips buck upward, slowly at first, and then a little harder as I realized how much he could take. I was aware of the power I had, and that with each thrust, there was a moment where Casey couldn't breathe for a second.

It took a lot of trust to let someone do that. I could tell we *both* knew that from experience.

And Casey did trust me. Already. Even though I'd barely earned it.

A minute later he wrapped his fist around the base of my shaft, slowly stroking it as he looked up at me. His expression conveyed only one thing: he looked *gone*. Peaceful, relaxed as all hell, his eyelids dropped halfway down.

But in that moment, he also looked at me with an amount of care that made me pause. After all, in reality I was just getting a blow job from a hot guy I'd met at a bar, and there was a part of me that never expected much from these sorts of things. Casey didn't have to look at me with kind, caring eyes like that, but here he was doing it.

Almost like he was checking in on *me*.

Even though I was the one who had just been fucking his mouth like he was mine.

He held my gaze as he lowered back down, licking up my shaft slowly again. I was starting to realize he didn't want me

to come too fast, and I hated and loved that, all at the same time.

“Damn,” I said, my voice coming out low. “You really do know how to keep me right on the edge.”

“You like it?” he said, teasing me again.

“Just a little bit,” I said, and we both knew it was an understatement.

As he started taking my cock into his mouth again, going obscenely deep, I knew it wasn't just about the way he was blowing me. It was about the way he'd looked at me since the moment he met me. How unashamed he'd been in the bar. The fact that he was doing all of this right by the Christmas tree was just the cherry on top.

Something started to build in the pit of my stomach. He reached one hand up to squeeze my ass. Little sounds escaped his mouth—both the slick, wet, lurid sound of his spit and his own humming. Could it even be called humming? It was more like outright *moaning* around my dick.

Every cell in my body lit up as I started bucking my hips upward again, and this time I didn't feel in control of it at all. There was no question that I was going to come, sooner rather than later.

“You want it,” I said, my voice broken and breathy. “You want it so badly.”

He moaned deeply around my cock. I didn't even know where the words spilling out of my mouth were coming from. I didn't usually say things like that—hell, I didn't always even talk at all, during sex.

But Casey brought something animal out of me, something I'd probably hold back with anyone else.

“I need it,” he said, popping off of my cock just for a moment. “Come on my tongue?”

I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek as he lowered again, cupping my balls with one hand while the other was around the bottom of my shaft. He lapped and sucked as his

hand twisted around my slicked cock, and I was past the point of no return.

I was going to give it to him. Hell, right now, I'd give Casey my entire fucking world.

Pleasure that had built all night concentrated deep below the base of my cock. And if I'd thought I was being more vocal than usual before, it was ten times worse now, as I groaned, my jaw dropping as I watched myself disappear between Casey's lips again and again. My hand grasped for something on the ground nearby, finding a section of the soft Christmas tree skirt and gripping my fist around it.

I inhaled deeply as my orgasm crashed down and I came in his mouth. My whole world was the smell of pine mixed with the smell of *him*, and I was lost in it. Spiced and clean and sexier than fucking hell.

Casey swallowed around my cock as I pulsed over and over onto his tongue, feeling a deep relief like I hadn't felt in... way, way too fucking long.

And those eyes. Those pale blue, gorgeous eyes. He looked up at me as I came with that same caring look on his face, like he was here just for me.

I really must have been far gone. It wasn't every day that my post-orgasm lustful haze made me think a stranger was *made for me*.

But that look in his eyes still seemed like an invitation. Even after I'd come. Like a subtle flashing arrow leading me down a path, whispering somewhere deep in my bones: *yes. Keep going. This way.*

I was either losing it or I had been more desperate for a good release than I'd realized.

I lay back onto the floor as Casey slowly popped off of my dick, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. The moment he got down next to me, I tugged him into a kiss.

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you,” I repeated, not knowing how to form any other words right now. “Thank you, thank you.”

“Believe me when I tell you, it was all my pleasure.”

“I like where I am right now,” I murmured against his lips. “I’m in the middle of a Christmas tree and Casey sandwich.”

“You’re the meat, and the tree and I are the bread,” he said, his eyes alighting as he smiled. “Maybe I named my vacuum, but apparently you’re also a total goofball after you come.”

“And apparently, after I come, I want to make *you* come,” I said as I ran an open palm down the front of his chest, stopping to give one of his nipples a pinch. “And mess with you, a little bit.”

He hissed, smiling slightly. “Fucker.”

“You liked it.”

“Loved it,” he murmured, his eyelids fluttering shut. I let my fingertips venture lower, watching as he broke out in goosebumps when I trailed my hand near the V-shape that led to his waistband.

“Okay. Get these off,” I said in a low voice.

As I’d been learning all night, Casey loved following orders. He pulled off his pants, revealing a pair of navy blue boxer briefs that had a wet spot right near the outline of the tip of his cock.

“Is this for me?” I said, swirling my finger there. His cock pulsed beneath the thin fabric.

“Yes. Do you want to taste it?” he asked, coy and teasing.

For fuck’s sake. If I hadn’t just come, I’d have been harder than a fucking diamond hearing him talk to me like that while he batted his eyelashes at me.

“I do want to taste it,” I told him. “Get naked.”

He slowly inched down the waistband of his underwear and finally his cock was free, harder than hell, with a pink tip, and literally dripping for me. He tossed away his boxer briefs and looked at me as I propped myself up on one elbow,

marveling at his body, youthful and smooth and everything I wanted right now.

I dragged a fingertip across the bead of precum there and brought it to my tongue.

“Tastes like Christmas morning,” I said.

He went from looking entranced to laughing in about half a second. “Okay. Forget everything I’ve said. I think I hate you,” he said.

“You don’t hate me even a little bit,” I said, dipping lower as I got onto my knees and moved towards his cock.

“Fuck,” he whispered, his eyes glued to me as I slid lower. I pressed a kiss to the spot just above his hip, then another one on his lower stomach, and then another right at the base of his cock. He pulled in a breath. “Seeing you down there... good *God*.”

“It makes you want to come for me?”

He pulled in a shuddering breath, nodding. “It makes me want to call you Daddy.”

CASEY

However screwed I'd been the moment I met Rome, I was in ten times deeper, now.

I'd already called him *Daddy* and he hadn't even gotten his lips around my cock yet. It was no secret that I liked it, and I'd joked about it with my friends for years—wanting to find a hot guy that would let me call him Daddy, thinking it was a little silly at first but then not being able to control myself when I fantasized about it and jerked off.

There was no real logic to it, and I'd long since given up trying to overthink it.

It was fucking hot. It made me hard. And when I had a bona fide, ten out of ten *inferno* level hot man making his way between my legs, with his greying hair brushing up against my thigh?

The word *Daddy* had just slipped out of my mouth unbidden, like I had no self-control at all.

Any worries I had quickly melted away, though, when I saw the look on Rome's face. There was something so comforting about the way he looked at me, even when I was totally lost in my own horny fucking state of mind meltiness for him.

“Call me Daddy anytime you want,” he said, running a hand down the inside of my thigh. “Like right now. Or like when I first get my mouth around your cock. Or when I make you moan my name in a little while when you come for me.”

“Holy hell,” I uttered.

My heart was pounding hard. Every sensation in my body almost felt like a little *too* much, right now.

How could this be my life?

“Say what you want,” he told me, his voice dropping into the blindingly hot, deep, commanding tone he was learning I loved. “Use your words.”

“I want you,” I said immediately. “So fucking badly.”

He clicked his tongue, just sitting there between my legs. “Going to have to be more specific. And say my name.”

“Rome,” I whispered. “I want your lips around my cock. Please?”

“Is that what you want to call me, baby?” he asked. His eyes were like fire. His tone made my cock pulse.

“I want your mouth, Daddy,” I said. It was a good thing that I was lying down on the floor, because if I’d been standing right now, my knees would have gone completely weak.

“I know you do.”

He finally relented, lowering nearer to my cock. He positioned himself lower and started to press a trail of kisses along my inner thigh, still teasing me along but finally giving me the skin-on-skin contact I needed. Fantasizing about older men had always been fun, but having Rome *right here* between my legs was better. There was no question anymore that this was the hottest thing I’d ever done.

When he put his lips over the tip of my cock, dragging his tongue through the precum at my slit, I groaned deeply.

“You taste amazing,” he murmured.

“You feel...” I started to say, but I had no words that could accurately describe what he was doing to me. I was on another planet entirely when he started to suck, and even though he was starting slow and taking his time, I was already fucking *there*.

“I cannot wait to make you come for me,” he said after pulling off for a moment, gently pumping my cock with his fist as he looked at me.

He dipped back down a moment later, the wet heat of his mouth covering my shaft again.

“Thank you, Daddy,” I uttered, my voice broken and pathetic.

Big mistake.

Colossal fucking mistake.

Calling him that while he sank his mouth down around my cock, hot and wet and perfect, short-circuited something in my brain that I knew I couldn't control.

My orgasm didn't surge in like a tidal wave—it fucking *erupted*, all at once, like an explosion.

Way too fast.

“Oh *God*—” I managed to say right as I realized it wasn't going to wait, and that I was coming *now*, already, confirming every suspicion that I was absolutely desperate for Rome. Pleasure coiled in my stomach and I came in his mouth before I could regain any sense of self-control. I rocked my hips upward, my body unable to restrain itself from wanting more, more, more of him.

He let out a surprised but satisfied moan around me and took my load like a champion, of course.

But heat radiated through every inch of my body. I was blushing like a fucking fool, swearing under my breath more than I ever had.

“Holy hell,” I breathed, my eyes wide as fuck as I looked down at him. “That did *not* just happen. I'm so sorry, I never come that fast. *Ever*. Jesus Christ, can someone call the Guinness Book of World Records for most embarrassing orgasms of all time? I think I might have just won—”

“Hush,” Rome said after he'd swallowed around me. “You're joking, right? You just came from only *that* much

contact. That's how turned on you were. In my book, that's a massive compliment."

"Well, then, I'm a big fan of the rules in your book," I told him. I lay back onto the floor, pulling in a slow breath and trying to make my heart stop racing.

"You want to know something?"

"Yes," I said. "Please. Anything to get my mind off of what I just did."

He let out a low laugh, coming to snuggle up next to me and wrapping an arm around me.

"I've never hooked up with somebody underneath a Christmas tree before."

I furrowed my brow. "What? But you're exactly the person who *would* have done that. You literally own a company with Christmas Cheer in the name."

"I know," Rome said. He let his hand come up and trail along the top of my chest, a warm, comforting gesture. "I guess I've always kept business and pleasure separate. You took my blowjob-by-the-Christmas-tree virginity."

I laughed. "I feel special."

He leaned closer, pressing a soft, slow kiss to the side of my head. "You are."

It shouldn't have surprised me that he was still so affectionate even after we'd both come. He'd been nothing but gentlemanly all night, yet my mind always flitted to the worst case scenario when it came to hookups. I expected guys to want to jet off, leaving me to myself after we'd finally finished.

But Rome seemed content to stay right here with me, beneath the glow of the tree.

"I like this ornament," he said, reaching up to touch the thin, clear star I had on one of the bottom levels of the tree.

"It's so pretty," I agreed. "A friend gave me that one near the end of college."

Rome's gaze danced across my tree. His eyes looked beautiful with the twinkly lights reflected in them.

Suddenly, his face changed.

His whole goddamn expression changed. At first, I thought he must have seen a spider, and my skin prickled with fear.

“What? What is it?”

Rome didn't just look scared now—he looked downright *shaken*, his skin seemingly paler.

“I... Casey, did you go to—”

I frowned at him, propping myself up on my elbows. “What's wrong? Tell me.”

“Did you go to Boulder University?”

I nodded. “Mhmm.”

Rome swallowed hard, and I watched his Adam's apple bob. “And you graduated...”

“Two years ago.”

I turned my gaze to what Rome was looking at on my tree.

“Oh,” I said. “This ornament?”

He was looking at an ornament that I'd made with my roommates in my senior year of college. It was a picture of the four of us in front of our shared house from that year, and we'd encased the picture in a handmade, bronze-painted frame. It was of my buddies Jake, Garen, and of course, my best friend Justin.

“Yeah,” Rome whispered.

“I know my crafting skills aren't great,” I said. “My frame turned out a little lopsided, but one of the guys' girlfriends had a party where we all made these in our senior year. It's me and my friends.”

“So you know those guys well?”

“I lived with all of them, but Justin the most. He's the one on the right, and he's my best friend. We're still really close, but he travels a lot, like I was telling you about earlier.”

Rome's face was still frozen like stone.

He suddenly moved to grab his boxer briefs, tugging them on before quickly pulling on his pants.

“Was hoping you wouldn't cover up that perfect cock so soon—”

“Casey,” Rome said, turning back to me with an intense look on his face. “You don't understand.”

“What?”

He scrubbed his palm over his face, then looked back at me, his gaze steady now.

“I'm Justin's father.”

The world seemed to stop on its axis in that moment.

I heard the faintest sound of crickets coming in from outside the window.

I heard the hum of my refrigerator from the kitchen.

And most of all, I heard my own heartbeat, rapidly getting faster in my chest.

“I—” I started to say, but my throat suddenly felt tighter, and I had no idea what I was going to say at all.

Memories started flashing through my head in a rush. A flood of things that Justin had offhandedly mentioned to me. Things I'd never given much thought—about his childhood and his parents.

“Justin always called his best friend ‘Case’ when he talked about him,” Rome said, his own voice low and hoarse. “*Case* this, *Case* that. Case and I went to the football game, Case and I finished our midterms, Case is always there when I need him.”

I swallowed past the tightness in my throat. “Yeah,” I whispered. “That's... what he calls me.”

“Oh, *God*,” he uttered.

“He always said his dad was a great guy, too. That his dad gets hired by different townships for all sorts of projects. That

his dad was the reason he had the guts to finish college at all.”

Rome and I stared at each other in silence for a moment, each of us realizing the enormity of what we’d just done.

He was my best friend’s dad.

I stood up, adrenaline hitting me all at once. I was still naked, standing there staring at Rome, fire in his eyes, both of us like volcanoes about to blow.

“Justin is going to fucking kill me,” I said.

ROME

I pinned Casey with my gaze. “Justin isn’t going to kill you, because he’s *never* going to find out.”

I caught myself glancing back at the Christmas tree again, my eyes landing on the ornament that had changed the entire course of my evening. Hell, the entire course of my *life*.

From now on, this night would be a part of my past. The night I’d fooled around with my son’s best friend under his Christmas tree. I turned away, looking at Casey’s blue couch, at the rug, at anything other than the goddamn ornament again. Everything felt surreal, like I was watching someone else’s life unfold, instead of my own.

Because I wouldn’t do something like this. And yet I’d already done it.

“I can’t keep a secret from him,” Casey said. “I tell him everything. Literally everything. He remembers more about my past hookups than I do.”

“Well, I *don’t* tell him everything, because he’s my son. It’s not going to happen,” I said sternly.

“Fuck,” Casey hissed. “Fine. Okay. Yes. I won’t tell Justin, and it’ll be the only secret I ever keep from him.”

“Good.”

“*Not* good,” he snapped back. “I want to be honest with him.”

I turned back to him, feeling like each and every emotional wall inside me was starting to crumble.

“Can you please put some clothes on, Casey?” I asked. I didn’t bother trying to hide the pleading tone from my voice.

Luckily, he obliged. It was easier to look at him with clothes on—not because I hadn’t enjoyed seeing him naked. I’d enjoyed it *too* much. And now it just felt like a slap in the face to be confronted with the raw desire I’d had for someone I never should have been involved with at all.

He pulled in a long breath, running his fingers through his hair.

“Just come with me into the kitchen for a minute,” he said. “Do you want something to drink?”

“I don’t know if I want a neat gallon of whiskey right now or if I should never consume alcohol in your presence again,” I said, only slightly joking. “Maybe one shot of whiskey, and then some water, too.”

“I can do that for you,” Casey said with a nod. “Come on.”

He led me around the corner of the room into the kitchen I’d already heard so much about. It very much looked like it was under construction, with wood panels stacked against one wall, portions of the countertops covered in plastic, and various contractor’s tools in one corner.

I felt like I was walking through a surreal dream as I looked around, now.

How had I gotten here?

How the fuck was he Justin’s best friend?

He reached up into a cabinet, procuring a bottle of whiskey and pouring small amounts for each of us into two small ceramic coffee mugs. One mug had a small picture of a Great Dane on it, and the other had a picture of a Chihuahua.

“Forgive the lack of glasses,” Casey said, handing me the Chihuahua mug. “I haven’t exactly gotten around to getting all the new stuff I need for this house yet.”

I stared at the picture on my mug, grateful to think about anything else. The dog may have looked like a tiny rat, but a very cute rat, nonetheless. “Do you know these dogs, or did you somehow acquire two random mugs with the biggest and smallest dogs on them?”

“They’re my grandparents’ dogs. A Chihuahua named Cheeky and a Great Dane named Boat.”

“They named their dog *Boat*?”

Casey shrugged one shoulder. “Look at him. He’s as big as a boat.”

“Fair.”

“After my grandpa retired, he and my grandma started fostering a lot of animals, and Cheeky and Boat are the two they ended up keeping. They love those dogs like children. Hence the mugs they gave everyone in the family.”

“That’s a lot cuter than I expected.”

He raised his mug toward me. “Cheers.”

“Cheers. To Boat and Cheeky.”

We clinked the mugs and took our shots of whiskey. The world around me didn’t feel like it was crashing down anymore, but I still had a knot of guilt in my chest that was growing bigger by the minute.

“Listen,” I said. “We had fun. A lot of fun. Okay? We can just leave it at that. It was a hookup like any other, and we will go back to our normal lives and forget about each other starting tomorrow.”

“Right,” he said softly, looking down at the contents of his mug. “We can just... forget each other.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. He didn’t sound like he believed it any more than I did.

There was no chance I was forgetting any part of this night, and we both knew it. Even now, sitting across from him with silly coffee mugs, was more comforting than it should have been. I *wanted* to stay here. I liked being with him.

But there was also no chance that we could ever be a part of each other's lives.

"Thank you again," I said before downing the rest of my whiskey in one gulp.

"Whoa, there," Casey said, eyeing my mug with a bit of concern as I put it down on the table. "Didn't think we were racing to finish our drinks."

"I need to get back. And after that drink, I'm calling a cab."

"At least let me call one for you—"

"I'll be fine, Casey," I interjected. "I've been on my own for years, I think I can handle one night."

The hurt in his eyes was visible, and I had put it there. His lashes were two dark rows, glancing down at the table, now.

"Right," he said softly.

Now I had even more guilt piled on top of what was already there. It felt like there was a steady storm inside me, now threatening a downpour.

"Sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't mean it to sound quite so harsh."

I reached out a hand and squeezed his shoulder. Finally, he smiled, even though there was still some amount of bittersweetness behind it.

"We had fun," he said.

"We did."

"Goodnight, Casey," I said, grabbing my jacket and heading back out his front door. As I waited outside for my ride, I expected him to come follow me out. I didn't know what I wanted. One more kiss? A goddamn hug? I shouldn't have wanted him to come outside at all, and still some part of me wished for it like a drug.

But he didn't come out. He was being polite, after all, and respecting what I'd said I'd wanted.

For the better.

My ride pulled up and I stepped in. Back to reality. Back to real life, before Casey had taken one night and made it a memory.

I *had* to forget about him.

* * *

“Well, would you look at that,” I said as I walked up to Justin a week later. “Traveling clearly has changed you. That haircut is killer, Jus.”

I said a little silent prayer of thanks for the fact that things instantly felt normal now that Justin was back in town. He didn’t have to know anything about what I’d done with Casey, and it would stay that way forever.

“Sure hope the haircut looks good,” Justin said, “because I paid big bucks for it when I was in Manhattan.”

Ever since high school, Justin had been a bit of a hippie. I’d thought it was funny, watching him go for the same style of clothes that I’d briefly been into as a kid. He’d always had a free wheeling style, and longish, shaggy hair. But since I’d last seen him, he’d gotten a fresh, cropped haircut, short on each side and a little longer on top.

It looked great, but Justin was my son, and I’d support any haircut he wanted, even if it was neon green spikes all over his head.

I came over and pulled him into a hug. “Good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, Dad.”

We were outside our favorite Christmas tree lot in Boulder. We’d been coming every year for Justin’s whole life, even back when I’d still been together with his mother.

“Well, you’re in town for a week, but we’re going to get you the best Christmas tree on this lot.”

“I’m ready to fight old ladies for it,” Justin said.

“Oh yes,” I told him. “I expect at least a few fistfights tonight. If we don’t get thrown out of this lot, we haven’t done our job.”

Justin laughed. “Let’s get in there. Oh, and Case just texted me and said he’ll be here in five.”

I froze. “Case?”

Justin nodded. “He texted from a red light. Said he just got down the mountain.”

I swallowed hard.

Holy shit. He had invited Casey tonight?

“I thought you said you might meet up with guys from your *work* here tonight.”

Justin glanced up at me, cocking his head to one side. “Nah,” he told me. “I guess I was telling you about Ollie and Zach from work, but Case is who I invited to pick out my Christmas tree. I’ve told you about Case before, plenty of times.”

“Right,” I said. “Right.”

“You’ll love him. Don’t worry.”

Something ricocheted around in my chest.

It had been a week since my night with Casey. I’d spent a few days thinking about it way more than I should have, usually at night before falling asleep. But by now, I had successfully convinced myself that I could put the memory of Casey into a box, and shelve it away in my mind.

That shelf had just come toppling down.

“Holy shit, look at that one,” Justin said, pointing toward a Christmas tree right near the front of the entrance. “I know you’re going to tell me I’m being too hasty, but that might be the winner already.”

He started in toward the entrance, walking under the wood and pine awning that led into the lot. The air had been chilly all night, but now I shivered a little. I knew it was because of my nerves.

“Yeah,” I called out, finally following behind Justin. “Uh, it looks great.”

He furrowed his brow as I walked up. “Earth to Dad,” he said. “Usually you would yell at me ‘til your face was blue if I expressed any desire for the first tree I walked past. *You’ve gotta see all your options*, blah blah blah.”

“I never *yell* at you, and you know it,” I said, taking a deep breath. “But yes. You’re nuts if you think you’re picking a tree before seeing each one in this lot.”

Justin laughed. I suddenly found myself wishing I’d worn something nicer tonight—maybe a nice scarf, or a leather jacket, instead of my thick flannel and simple black coat. The only consolation was that Justin seemed oblivious to my sudden nervous energy. He was happily going from tree to tree, weaving in between other people bundled up out here in the cold.

I heard Casey before I saw him, a few minutes later.

“That is *not* the hippie-ass, free-loving, long-haired Justin I know,” his voice came from behind as he saw Justin’s haircut.

“Check me out,” Justin said, his eyes going wide as he saw his best friend, showing off his hair.

“You look fucking awesome, even if it’s different,” Casey said. “Have you—”

Casey stopped short as I turned, locking eyes with him as he walked up to us.

He looked every bit like a deer caught in headlights. Probably something similar to the brief paralysis I’d gotten five minutes ago.

“If you were going to ask if I’ve found the perfect tree yet, the answer is yes,” Justin said as he walked over to Casey and gave him a big hug, ignoring how strange *both* of us were acting right now. “But I still have to look at every other tree before my dad will ever let me settle on one. Which, by the way—Casey, this is my dad. Dad, this is Case.”

Casey held out his hand to shake mine. I was trying to act like I'd just met him, and every fiber of my being resisted it.

I didn't lie.

I *never* lied. Not to Justin or anyone else. But I couldn't think of what I could do right now, other than pretend I'd never met him.

"We've actually met," Casey said, lifting an eyebrow right as we shook hands.

"Wait, what?" Justin asked.

Panic hit my blood.

Full, five-alarm, internal panic.

What the fuck was Casey doing?

"Justin, I, uh—" I started.

"We met last week," Casey said confidently. "He was hanging decorations at Jade Brewery."

"Oh my God," Justin said, his face lighting up in a smile. "How cool."

Relief flooded through me. For a split second I'd wondered if Casey really had been about to drop the full story on Justin, and I would have high-tailed it out of the Christmas tree lot in two seconds flat.

"Your dad's a great guy, Justin," Casey said. "And he's right, you know, about not picking the first tree you see."

"Case knows I'm always like this," Justin told me. "It was like that for all of college. First food I see in the cafeteria? That's the one I want. First girl I go on a date with that semester? She's who I want to date. I say it makes life simpler."

"Meanwhile, I can't make a decision to save my life," Casey said. "Picking the tiles for my kitchen backsplash? That was a two-week ordeal."

Justin laughed.

The panic from seeing Justin and Casey in the same place started to settle; just a little. Justin didn't seem to think anything was strange, and there was no reason Casey and I had to either.

"Stop everything," I said, nodding over toward the edge of the tree lot, where there were a few food trucks set up. "I see mulled wine."

"I've never had mulled wine before," Casey said. "Isn't it sweet?"

"Only very slightly," Justin said. "But it's spiced and delicious."

"If you've never had mulled wine, you're about to have it," I said. "I'll get three, and some roasted nuts on the side."

Alcohol would help. Especially if it was mulled wine.

We took off toward the food trucks, walking under the endless strands of twinkle lights. Everything smelled like pine. I was finally starting to warm up.

And a low, simmering guilt that had been gnawing at me all week was actually, *finally* starting to dissipate.

We could do this. I could exist in a world where Casey and Justin were both here, and everything felt right.

Good, even.

All I had to do was act normal, and everything would be fine.

CASEY

Growing up, my mom had always said I was good in an emergency. There'd been a small fire in our kitchen once, and even as a twelve-year-old, I'd known to smother it instead of toss water at it and make everything worse. I remained calm and collected on the outside, even when I was completely freaked out on the inside.

And it was all I could think about now, as I casually walked around with Rome and Justin, sipping mulled wine and chatting like the three of us were all good friends.

Even though I was dying a little inside, every time I caught Rome's gaze.

Every time I accidentally looked a little too long at his lips, and remembered how good they had felt on mine.

I tried to shove those memories out of my mind.

"I swear, he looked like he wanted to kill me for it," Justin was saying, still laughing about a man who'd come up and snatched up a Christmas tree from right under his nose.

"You could have taken him, for sure," Rome said.

"Dad, I'm a pacifist, and you know it," Justin said. "I might not look like a hippie anymore, but I'm all about peace. Even when it comes to Christmas tree snatchers like him."

I clicked my tongue. "You're lucky I already have my tree set up, otherwise I'd be fighting you for that one at the front. I still think it's the best."

“Casey, don’t encourage him,” Rome said. “We still have the back half of the lot to check. And I have a working theory that that’s where they keep the freshest trees. Holy shit, speaking of which—look at those.”

Rome took off like a bloodhound toward the edge of the lot, where two guys were loading more trees fresh off of a long truck.

“That’s like catnip to my dad,” Justin said, nodding over toward him. “Trees so new they’re literally still loading them off of the pallets? He’s in heaven.”

For a moment Justin and I stood watching as Rome inspected all of the new trees across the way.

“I’m glad you’re back. Even if it’s just for a week,” I said.

“Me, too. Thanks for coming tonight, too,” Justin said. “I think my dad likes you. I haven’t seen my dad this happy in way too long.”

I felt a heat creep up to my cheeks, and I was glad for the dim light so Justin didn’t see me blushing for no damn reason.

I cleared my throat. “Likes me?” I said.

Justin nodded. “Oh, yeah. He’s having a great time, he’s getting along with you, and he’s in his element being in a Christmas tree lot, for sure. It’s good to see. To be honest, I’ve been worried about my dad.”

“Wait, worried about him? Why?” I asked. “Is something up with him?”

Justin’s face looked crestfallen as he stared off toward his dad, who was currently running a hand along a branch on one of the pine trees. “I mean, where do I start? Something’s been up with him for years, I think.”

I furrowed my brow. “This is new to me. You never mentioned anything was going on with your dad, other than that he was a great guy.”

“He is a great guy,” Justin said. “I just don’t always think he sees that.”

“Really? He seems pretty confident to me,” I said softly.

I was trying my hardest not to think about my night with Rome right now—but the last thing in the world he’d seemed was unsure about himself. He’d been smoother than hell, fun-loving, and had been totally at home in his own skin when he was with me.

“If you want the truth, I don’t think he’s ever let himself live down being alone for so long,” Justin said. “I mean, for the last decade, I was busy with school and now work. But he’s tried so hard to date and find love again. Women, men, tons of dates that seemed so promising and never ended up panning out.”

“Your dad’s a total catch,” I said. “I can’t believe that.”

“I know,” Justin told me. “My mom found someone else so quickly back in the day, and it blindsided him. It hasn’t been as easy for him.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe he just has high standards.”

“And he’s fucking *lonely* now, dude,” Justin said. “He’s dying of loneliness, and he doesn’t even realize it.”

Justin’s words hit me right in the heart. I tried to play it cool, waving a hand through the air.

“He doesn’t seem that lonely to me.”

Justin pulled in a big breath of air, his expression finally softening. “Yeah, because tonight is the happiest I’ve seen him in a really long time. I was starting to wonder if he’d given up on the magic of this time of year, but tonight, it’s back.”

I shook my head. “Nuh-uh,” I said. “I refuse to believe that a man who brings holiday cheer to all of Denver would ever lose that magic.”

Rome came walking back over a minute later, a serene smile on his face.

“Justin, I know you’re dead set on that other tree, but come look at the fresh ones,” he said. “Totally worth fighting for. Casey, you might even want to get one, too.”

“I already have a tree, and you know it,” I said.

My breath hitched for a moment.

Shit. If I was trying to pretend Rome had never come over to my house, how would he know I already had a tree?

“Casey gets a tree the first moment the air is cold every year,” Justin said. “He already mentioned he has one, Dad.”

Heat flooded my body. So I *had* mentioned it. The lines were starting to blur between what Rome and I had talked about last week and what we’d said tonight, and I knew I was going to have to watch myself closer.

“So get a second tree, then, Casey,” Rome said. His smile was radiant. For a moment, I caught his eye, and the same safe, cozy feeling returned to me.

I felt at *home* with him. He was attractive as all hell, but he was also so comforting.

And I knew exactly how good it felt to have his hands on me. To wrap my arms around his broad shoulders. To be *truly* close to him.

But that was exactly the thing I needed to ignore.

No matter how much my body craved him.

The rest of the night passed by without incident, and as I watched Rome get in his truck at the end of the night, I knew it might be the last time I saw him.

My latest regret, and my best Christmas memory, all wrapped up in one man.

I went home alone and successfully thought about other things until I finally tucked into bed. As I drifted off to sleep, all I could see in my mind’s eye was Rome’s smile.

And I fucking *missed* him. Missed a man I barely knew, who I couldn’t have, and who’d made his way into my deepest desires anyway.

How the hell had he gotten under my skin so damn easily?

Because he gave you the best night of your life, I thought idly as I fell asleep, hugging my pillow and wishing it could be him.

ROME

I picked up the short glass of whiskey, enjoying its steady weight in my hand as I swirled the liquor around a single ice cube.

“This was the right call,” I said across the bar to Harlan, the lumberjack head brewer at Jade Brewery.

“It seemed like more of a whiskey night than a beer night, didn’t it?” Harlan said. “I’m a beer man through and through, but a snowy night calls for at least a little whiskey.”

“Cheers to that,” I said, taking a slow sip. The liquor burned in just the right way as I swallowed.

“What brings you up here again tonight?” Harlan said.

I’d been surprised when Harlan remembered me at all when I’d walked into Jade Brewery tonight. It had been well over two weeks now since I’d come here to put up decorations and chat with Casey, but the moment I’d walked in, Harlan had greeted me with a warm grunt and a wave, which for him seemed like the VIP treatment.

“I’m up here on a whim, to be honest,” I said. “No real reason to be up in the mountains, but I had a job all day today on the west side of the city. After I finished up, I just kind of... turned my truck this way and drove.”

Harlan nodded. “Those nights are the best, sometimes. Glad you’re back, either way.”

I wished I could explain it better, but the truth was that some part of my brain had been floating on a cloud for the past

couple of weeks. In the days that followed my first night with Casey, it became clearer and clearer that this December was going to be one of the stranger ones in my life.

First, there was the night with Casey itself. Then later, the night at the Christmas tree lot. But now, another week and a half had passed since the night at the tree lot with Justin, and my memories of Casey had morphed into something different altogether.

Because Casey and I had been texting each other.

A lot, actually.

I'd ended up with his number in yet another strange turn of events, when Justin dropped and shattered the screen of his own phone. He insisted that Casey send me the dozens of pictures he'd taken that night of us, and he'd given Casey my number.

And then, the next day, I got another picture from Casey. A simple shot of a wreath he'd liked on one of his neighbor's mailboxes. This had slowly snowballed into both of us sending each other pictures of various wintertime decorations, anytime we saw something we both liked. Trees, lights, a dog in a reindeer costume, a snowman. Each time I saw his name pop up on my screen I instantly felt warmer inside.

Because I knew I'd be getting a little glimpse into some sort of Christmas cheer he saw that day.

And because I knew he was thinking of me. Which I shouldn't have wanted, but I definitely *did* want.

Now I was here at Jade Brewery, looking at my phone every ten minutes like an idiot, wondering what he was up to. I felt like a monster.

I tipped back my glass of whiskey, drinking down the rest of the cool, amber liquor probably way too quickly.

"Another?" Harlan asked.

"I think so," I said. "It's *that* kind of night."

He nodded, pouring me a fresh glass. The brewery was fairly slow tonight, with just a few people sitting at the other

end of the bar and a few more out at the booths.

The front doors swung open, and I glanced over.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw Casey. For a second I wondered if I was dreaming it—I'd been doing double-takes all week, thinking random guys in the store or on the sidewalk were him.

But this actually was him. He was wearing a puffy black winter jacket and hat and had a red scarf wrapped around his neck. And he was carrying something huge from one end, while someone else held up the other side.

“Harlan,” he said. “We’ve got just what you ordered.”

Casey hadn't seen me yet. I watched as he and another guy walked in a big, heavy-looking box, carrying it over behind the bar.

“They’re finally here?” Harlan said, a big smile spreading over his bearded face.

“All yours,” the guy on the other end of the box said. I recognized him—it was Harlan's best friend Sawyer, who he'd been chatting with last time I was here. After setting down the box he gave Harlan a big hug, and he and Casey opened the box.

“Oh, that smells like heaven on Earth,” Harlan said.

“Just arrived from California this morning. Enjoy.”

It was a huge box of fresh oranges, and the scent filled the air immediately.

“Oranges always remind me of Christmastime,” Casey said. “Hang on.”

I watched as he pulled out his phone, snapping a photo of the citrus bounty. He hadn't seen me yet. He was still turned away from where I was at the far end of the bar, and he leaned over his phone for a moment. My phone vibrated a second later, and when I checked it, I couldn't keep a huge smile from my face.

He'd sent me the picture of the oranges. So simple, so sweet, and it melted my heart instantly.

I jotted him a quick message.

>>**Rome:** *Behind you.*

Casey finally turned to look my way, and the surprise on his face was instantaneous.

"Well, hello, stranger," he said, walking over. He paused for a moment as he got closer, hesitating before leaning in for a hug.

And I hated how good it felt to hug him. He smelled like fresh citrus and like *himself*, a scent I remembered all too well from when I was in his house, tangled up with him under his tree.

"So, are you taking up a new job as a citrus delivery person?"

Casey sat down on the stool next to me and pulled off his scarf and jacket. His cheeks were still pink from being out in the cold. He looked so cute it almost physically hurt a little.

"You got it," he said as he settled in. "I decided to ditch the tech work and start a new life as Citrus Santa."

"It certainly made Harlan happy," I said, nodding over.

"He's just that happy every time he sees Sawyer," Casey told me. "Those two were *made* to be best friends."

"It's so sweet."

"Unfortunately I am not giving up my coding career for California orange delivery. I just saw Sawyer needed some help as I was walking in, ready to toss back several piña coladas."

I knitted my brow, staring at Casey. "Did you just say piña coladas?"

He nodded once. "Yeah. I'm really craving them."

"You're going to have a fucking piña colada a week before Christmas?"

A smile crept onto the edge of his lips. “Do I sense I’ve just stepped into a snake pit?”

“You haven’t just stepped into a snake pit, you just cannonballed into a tank of piranhas. Hell, you just woke up an angry, vengeful grizzly bear.”

Casey raised his eyebrows. “Oh yeah?”

“Piña coladas should be downright *banned* in wintertime, as far as I’m concerned,” I said. “It’s not only the middle of December in a mountain town, it’s also actively snowing outside, right now. You just took off a scarf, for God’s sake. And you want a pineapple coconut island drink? It’s blasphemy.”

Casey pushed his hair to one side. “Because pineapple and coconut blended together with rum is goddamn delicious,” he said. “And the date on the calendar doesn’t change that.”

“I should’ve known,” I said, shaking my head slowly.

“That I was a filthy cocktail outlaw?”

“That you were capable of flying in the face of *all reason* like this, yes,” I said. I reached out and gave his shoulder a little shove, chuckling to myself now. “What am I going to do with you, Casey?”

“You’re going to watch me drink a piña colada, if you stay here,” he teased me. “And you’re going to like it.”

I leaned back on the barstool, smiling to myself as I took another slow sip of whiskey. A minute later, Harlan came over and Casey ordered the drink, and when Casey had it in front of him, he made every effort to show just how much he was enjoying it.

“Didn’t think my night was going to end up like this,” I said. “One moment, a guy’s just sitting at the bar enjoying his whiskey, and the next...”

“The next moment, he’s witnessing *me* enjoying my drink.”

“I’m glad you like it, Casey.”

As we sipped our drinks I finally had a moment to catch up mentally. I realized that since Casey had walked in, I'd actually been able to enjoy myself and let loose a little, rather than immediately sinking into a pit of guilt about what Casey and I had done.

“So, how have you been?” Casey asked me. “Other than roaming around town yelling at people for their drink choices, of course?”

I snorted. “I’ve been... good, actually.”

His eyes twinkled. “You sound surprised by that.”

“Maybe a little,” I said. “That night at the tree lot really helped me, in a lot of ways, if you want the truth.”

“Helped you feel better about what we did?”

“I think so,” I said. “A bit, at least. It was one of the nicest nights I’ve had in a long time.”

Casey peered at me, a question behind his eyes. “Justin mentioned that you can get a bit lonely around Christmas,” he said softly. “You never said anything about that to me.”

“Oh, God,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “Shit. I didn’t know Justin was aware of that. I try to keep my emotional shit to myself, for the most part.”

“Well, Justin can tell,” Casey said. “He’s good like that. And there’s nothing wrong with emotions. He knows you’re a human being, right? He’s not a little kid anymore.”

“I know he’s not. Hell, he’s already further in his career at 23 than I was for another decade after that.”

Casey nodded. “He was glad to see you happy, the night at the lot.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “I don’t want Justin to worry about me like that. I’m doing fine. I’m always fine.”

My words hung in the air. We lapsed into a short silence, watching Harlan and Sawyer picking out individual oranges from the box and cutting a couple of them open behind the bar.

The air smelled like citrus, and I was starting to feel a nice warmth from the whiskey, too.

“You’re fine, huh?” Casey finally asked, breaking the silence. “Fine’s not the same as good, though.”

I looked at him, glancing from his eyes to his lips and back again. “Well, I’m good right now. Is that good enough for you?”

“Maybe,” Casey murmured.

“Every time I see you, I feel better about myself. About everything,” I said. “Even when I open your texts and pictures. So thanks, Casey.”

Truthfully, it felt like Casey had changed my life, in some small way. Maybe it had just been a one-night hookup, and maybe it had been a mistake. But it had meant more to me than I wanted to admit.

When I looked at him now, I felt a longing that I knew would probably never be fulfilled. But he’d reminded me that I was capable of feeling that way, still.

That I was still worth something, even though I’d been alone for so long.

What could be so wrong about that?

CASEY

I sipped from the straw in my piña colada, enjoying every drop of the icy, sweet pineapple flavor despite Rome's adorable protesting.

Why did it always have to feel like magic, sitting across from Rome?

I didn't care who he was. My best friend's dad, a random hookup, a stranger. He could have been anyone and I'd have felt like I belonged right here next to him.

The conversation had lulled again for so long that I'd started to think it was over. But I knew I had more to say. So much more, even though I wasn't even half sure I could put it into words.

I spoke again, my voice still soft.

"I want to ask you a question, and I don't want you to get mad," I offered.

"Why would I get mad? Is it about another summer cocktail you want to drink? Because I don't know if I can handle a low blow like that," he joked.

"Not about a cocktail, I promise."

He pulled in a breath. I could see him struggling in real time, and I hated it. There was a silent tension between every moment we shared together, and the last thing on Earth I wanted was for him to be still plagued with guilt about what we'd done.

“Go for it,” he said, his hazel eyes looking sweeter and more earnest than ever.

I knew I shouldn't say what I was about to say. But some part of me *had* to.

“Do you think we could have been something, if the circumstances were different?” I asked.

Something in his eyes shifted the moment I said it. I felt like I'd just broken something in him. Like I'd shattered a glass in a room, and now everything had gone silent and strange, and it was all my fault.

Maybe it had been a mistake. Maybe he didn't actually feel the same as I did.

“Casey...”

“Nevermind,” I said, turning away from his gaze. I looked at my drink, nervously running a fingertip through the condensation on the side of the glass. “Don't answer that. I'm sorry I said it—”

“I think so, yes,” he said confidently, cutting through my bullshit. “If we'd met like we did, and you weren't my son's best friend? I think I still would have been scared as hell, and I would have felt like I was fumbling in the dark, and like you were out of my league. But yes, I would have tried.”

“Tried...”

He cleared his throat. “To date you,” he said. “I suppose. I don't think anything could have stopped me from trying.”

My heart felt like it was being slowly crushed as I looked back up at him. If I'd thought his eyes looked earnest before, the effect was only ten times stronger now. He looked like he would have hung the moon for me.

What was I supposed to say to that? Why the hell had I asked the damn question in the first place?

I'd only dug myself further into a hole of *wanting* Rome, craving him so damn badly, all the while knowing nothing was going to happen between us.

“I don’t know what the hell you mean by ‘out of your league,’ because you’re the one who’s out of my league,” I finally said, forcing a small smile onto my face. “But... thank you. That does mean something to me, even if it doesn’t change our life circumstances.”

He nodded once, a glimmer in his eyes. “It really does suck, doesn’t it? It would be so much easier if we didn’t get along so well. Or if the sex had been bad. Or if I’d just *hated* the finishes you picked for your kitchen remodel.”

I snorted. “Yeah,” I agreed. “I don’t know why I even like you so much. I’ve had actual relationships with people I couldn’t make myself care about as much as I already care about you. And all we did was hook up under my Christmas tree.”

“Maybe that’s all it was,” Rome said. “We were hypnotized and entranced because of the nearby tree and pretty lights. Maybe if we were in your bed instead, it all would have been awful.”

I was full-on laughing now. “That’s a lie, and we both know it.”

“When you’re right, you’re right.”

Images from our night together swirled through my mind as I watched him take another sip of his drink. Even the way he held his glass gave me a deep ache in my bones. I wanted his hands on me again. I wanted *more* than what I’d gotten.

As if he was reading my mind, he reached out a free hand, resting his palm on the top of my thigh. He rubbed my leg for a moment, and it felt like it may as well have been my cock for how much it turned me the fuck on.

I was getting hard now. My heart simultaneously felt so full and like it could break at any moment. My brain was a storm of emotions, good and regretful but also completely *not* regretful, all at once.

All I knew was that I wanted him.

I leaned forward on my barstool toward him. There wasn’t much distance between us to begin with, but there was even

less now, as I closed the gap between us. I hovered there for a moment, hesitating, not sure what I was even thinking. I wasn't thinking, really.

He hummed softly, his gaze flitting from my lips to my eyes. He reached up his hand, moving it from my thigh to the side of my face, gently stroking his thumb along my hair.

"I shouldn't be doing this," he murmured, his voice a low rumble that tugged at every cell in my body.

"I know."

"But I don't think I'm going to stop."

My heart thudded in my chest. I swallowed hard, nodding once at him. "I don't want you to stop."

Another moment passed that felt like an eternity. Rome leaned in even closer, hanging in the space in front of me for just a second before closing the gap.

He pressed his lips to mine. I wasn't able to think about anything—not the brewery, not the time of year, not any of the shit that Rome and I had been worrying about for weeks, now.

All I felt was his warmth. The slow movement of his mouth on mine as he opened to me, and the rush of wet heat when his tongue slid against mine. I felt like something inside me had just been let off a leash. My teeth found his lower lip and I bit down gently, pulling and sucking on him like he was mine.

He moaned against me, softly enough that no one would hear it but me. But it went straight through me like lightning. A deep, primal need for this man, that I knew would never be fulfilled.

"Fuck," I whispered against his lips as he pulled away. "*Fuck*, I want this."

"I want it, too."

Slowly, the world returned to my attention. The bar, the ambient noise, the entire reality of what we were doing. His eyes flared as he held my gaze, and I knew he must feel the same way.

For a moment, the kiss had felt like a green light. *Go, go, go.*

Now, I realized what it had actually been: a bookend.

I was never going to get to be with Rome, and this kiss wasn't going to change that. His hand slipped away next, and then he broke my gaze, turning to his whiskey and polishing off the rest of it in one sip.

And then he was standing up. Dropping cash on the bar. And looking at me, one last time.

“Thank you, Casey,” he said. “You’ve meant more to me than you could ever know.”

I wanted to scream as I watched him walk off toward the front doors of the brewery, but I was silent and stunned the whole time. How could I chase after someone who didn't want me? Or *couldn't* want me, no matter how badly we both wished it were different?

The door shut behind him, and I watched the slow pattern of the multicolored twinkling lights that were strung above the door.

Like I was dazed. Here, but not here at all.

* * *

It seemed like a bitter irony that an hour later, as I was walking home in the cold, my phone buzzed with a call from Justin.

I picked up, holding the phone against my ear as I crossed Spruce Street, walking under lights and garlands that I knew Rome had put up.

“Hey, Justin,” I said, trying to add some pep to my voice that wasn't coming easily.

“Case,” he said, chipper as ever. “Hey, man. What's up over there?”

“Just walking home from the brewery near me,” I said.

“I bet Jade River is even more decked out with Christmas spirit now, huh?”

I peered across the street toward the small brick theater building. “There’s a group of teenagers literally practicing Christmas carols in front of the local theater, so yes, I’d say peak Christmas is very much here.”

“I love it,” Justin said. “I’m in Las Vegas right now, and there’s definitely a lot of spirit here, too. But more of a gamble for Santa vibe than a small-town cheer vibe, for sure.”

I mustered a laugh. Thoughts of Rome were still swirling in my mind, making me feel at war even though I was talking to my best friend.

Just be honest with him, I told myself, even though in some ways it was impossible.

“I, uh, actually ran into your dad at the brewery tonight,” I said.

Even if I couldn’t be completely honest, I could at least tell Justin most of the truth.

“No way,” Justin said. “That’s awesome. Was he all lonely, drinking by himself in the days before Christmas?”

“I think he was,” I said. “But I was kind of lonely, too. It worked out.”

“You probably made him feel a lot better,” Justin told me.

I cringed internally. “I don’t know about that.”

“I’m *sure* you did. And actually, that was kind of why I was calling. I wanted to talk to you about my dad.”

In that moment my heart felt like it launched up to somewhere inside my throat.

Justin wanted to talk to me about his dad? Why? Was he onto me?

“You did?”

“I wanted to know if you’d be able to see him on Christmas,” Justin said.

A bit of relief hit me. Fear was replaced by confusion, though.

“Me?”

“I know you’re going to be busy with your mom and stuff,” Justin said. “But even if it was only for an hour, going to see Dad after your day with your family. Do you think you could swing it?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “I mean, I’m not sure, Justin. Why do you think that would be a good idea?”

“This is the first year I’m not going to be home for Christmas. Not even for Christmas Eve, or any of the days afterward. I’m in Vegas now, then San Francisco for a few days, and then I have to go all the way up to Chicago. And I know my dad’s taking that really fucking hard, Casey, even if he won’t admit it to me. He *loves* spending this time of the year with me.”

“Right,” I said, still surprised by everything he was telling me. “I just don’t know if he’d care at all to see *me*. I mean, he barely knows me.”

It was a lie.

On one hand, I really didn’t know Rome all that well. But I sure as hell knew him better than Justin realized.

“We always get fresh baked cinnamon rolls from this Swiss bakery in downtown Denver,” Justin said. “My dad said he isn’t even going to bother with them this year. Listen, you don’t have to hang out with my dad, or anything. But you could bring him those cinnamon rolls, maybe? Make him feel like he’s not completely depressed and alone on that night?”

“I could,” I said.

“I would owe you, big time,” Justin said. “I have more frequent flier miles than I know what to do with, so I’ll book you a trip to Hawaii, or something.”

I puffed out a laugh. “You don’t have to repay me *that* much. Just get me some beers when you’re back in town.”

He laughed. “Fine, fine,” he said, sighing. “I really am just worried about him, Case. And you guys got along great at the tree lot.”

“Of course,” I said. “I like your dad. Quite a lot, actually.”

Justin snorted. “Hey, you should just date him. That’ll solve everyone’s problems, right?”

I swore I would have melted into a fucking puddle of molten lava if I hadn’t been walking outside in the cold.

“Justin, don’t joke about that shit—”

“What?” he said, on one of his riffs, now. “You’d finally get a boyfriend, he’d get a new chapter in life, and I’d get to stop worrying about my poor, lonely father. What? It would be a total win-win situation if you dated my dad.”

He was giggling about it on the other end of the phone, amusing himself while I felt like I was going to explode.

“Quit it,” I said. “Did you take magic mushrooms over there in Vegas, or something? You’re nuts.”

“You’ve always needed to loosen up a little,” he protested. “Come on. It’s not like I’m some prude.”

“I’m not a *prude*, either,” I said. “But you’d never speak to me again if I dated your dad, and you know it.”

“I’m just kidding, man. Also, just because I’m a tech bro with a fancy haircut now doesn’t mean I’ve suddenly become uptight. I’m a hippie at heart, always and forever. Anything goes.”

“Right, right.”

“Not that my dad would ever actually date *you*, in reality —”

“Excuse me?” I interjected. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Justin laughed again. “Offended much, Case?”

“Shut up.”

“You’ll see, if you hang out with him a little bit on Christmas. He’s so old school. He’d probably think I’d freak out if he even gave you a glance. I don’t give a damn what he does, as long as he’s happy.”

If only you knew, I thought.

“I know you want him to be happy,” I reassured him.

“He did say he was looking at dating apps a few months ago. I don’t know. I’m sure he’ll find someone soon.”

I pulled in a long breath of cold air as I rounded the corner onto my quiet street. “I’ll give him cinnamon rolls and a little bit of company on Christmas night. Text me the name of the bakery.”

“You’re a godsend, Case.”

“It’ll be fun for me, too. No big deal.”

Maybe it would actually turn out to be true. Maybe it would be nice to have a bookend for my memories with Rome that wasn’t laced with so much heartache.

I could be a friend to him. Not some failed hookup.

All I had to do was show up, give him some cinnamon rolls, and remind him that he wasn’t alone.

I could control my desires for *one* night, on Christmas.

Easy.

ROME

I had the day plotted out perfectly. I knew I was going to have to fill my time this Christmas, keeping myself busy so that I wouldn't dwell on the fact that Justin was away, I was on my own, and I had no plans with any other family.

The plan went great, until it didn't.

The early hours of the day were easy, with making my own Christmas roast, lighting candles around the house, and calling up distant relatives to wish them well. During the afternoon, I stayed busy outside while the roast was in the oven, finally shoveling the bunches of snow that had fallen over the last couple of days, and clearing out my front path and sidewalk. Dinner was amazing, and I ate even better than I usually did when my son was around.

It was nighttime when everything all went haywire.

I drank too much wine, and then made the mistake of switching to whiskey. The problem wasn't that it felt bad—the problem was that it felt too *good*, sinking into the warm embrace of tipsiness then drunkenness as seven-thirty rolled around.

When the carolers came down my street, a creeping sense of loneliness seeped in and quickly took hold of the evening.

One moment I was fine and the next I was looking out the window at the gorgeous lights and blanket of snow outside, wondering why I was alone as the sounds of O Come All Ye Faithful floated down the street.

Somewhere in that time, as I was wondering if I should say *screw it* and go to bed early, my phone vibrated.

>>**Casey:** *Hey, stranger. You at home?*

I furrowed my brow, looking at my phone like it was glitching. Why would he be texting me to ask if I was home? And why did he care where I was?

>>**Rome:** *Yes. The carolers are on my street, and they're very talented.*

>>**Casey:** *I'm going to drop something off in five minutes. If you don't want to see me, I'll just leave it at the door. Up to you, Rome. Oh, and merry Christmas.*

I stared at the screen again frozen in place for a moment before bursting into action. I was willing to bet Justin had told Casey my address for this exact reason—he'd called me earlier today and said that he'd send "a special delivery" later. But I didn't know it would be freaking *hand-delivered*, and by Casey, no less. I was nowhere near prepared to be anything but alone right now.

One look at myself in my bedroom mirror and I groaned, running my fingers through my hair. I pulled a sweater over the old Rolling Stones t-shirt I was wearing, and ran to the bathroom to splash my face with water and run a comb through my hair.

I was clean, at least, even if I looked like a guy who'd just spent Christmas Day alone.

The doorbell rang way too soon. I pulled in a slow breath, trying to compose myself.

He's just trying to do something nice for you. No big deal. Just accept whatever the gift is, thank him, and say Merry Christmas.

I got to the door and swung it open to see Casey wearing a crimson sweater, a white scarf, and holding a big white box. His cheeks were flushed from the cold, and the moment I made eye contact with him, all hopes of acting "normal" flew right out the doorway past him.

“Oh, I know *exactly* what that is,” I said, looking down at the box.

“Justin said you would,” Casey told me. “Anyway, Merry Christmas, Rome.”

“Come inside,” I said quickly.

He bit his lower lip. I could see the hesitation all over his face, and half of me felt it, too.

I *shouldn't* invite him in.

And I knew I was going to.

“You sure?” Casey asked.

“Those cinnamon rolls aren't going to eat themselves.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips and it instantly melted some fraction of my heart. I let him in and led him to the kitchen, pulling out a chair for him to sit at the table in there.

“Whoa,” he said, looking all around as he walked in and set the cinnamon rolls down on the table. “I should have seen your kitchen before I decided on my own tile finishes. This is gorgeous, Rome.”

“This kitchen is the result of many, many years of effort,” I said. I was so used to my own kitchen that I'd forgotten how far it had come—I'd outfitted it with new countertops years ago, and I'd leaned into the Spanish style of tiles that the floor already had.

“It's so colorful. And unique. But it all works together so well.”

“I'm glad to see it through your eyes,” I said. “Damn, it really has been a while since I've had someone over.”

I showed him the tiles I'd sourced from Portugal, the wood venetian blinds on the windows that had been a bitch to install, and the various kitchen magnets I had collected from travels over the years. Within a few minutes I was relaxing again.

This was *Casey*, after all. I always seemed to feel comfortable talking with him, even if there was an

undercurrent of longing that I had to bite back at every moment.

He walked back over to the box of cinnamon rolls, opening it up.

“So, do you want to dig in?” he said. “I didn’t have dessert at my mom’s house and these look pretty enticing, to be honest.”

“Hey,” I said, walking over and batting his hand away as he tried to take out one of the cinnamon rolls. “Hell, no. That’s not how you do it.”

He looked up at me, confused. “There are rules for these cinnamon rolls?”

I walked over to my oven, turning it on to 300 degrees. “There are absolutely rules. You have to heat them up, and you have to have them with a glass of something good, whether it’s coffee, tea, or liquor.”

Casey smiled again. “You’re very particular about things, you know. I don’t even want to know what you’d have done if I showed up at your door, Christmas night, with a piña colada in my hand.”

I clutched my heart like he’d just tossed something at it. “You *wound* me, Casey.”

We waited for the cinnamon rolls to heat up and chatted about normal things, like any friends would. He told me about his Christmas day with his family, and I told him all of the little traditions I usually had with Justin at this time of year. When it was time to tuck into the rolls, I had a small cup of coffee and Casey had a little whiskey, and he confirmed that they were one of the best sweets he’d ever had.

“So you said you always watch Die Hard,” Casey said a half an hour later, leaning back in his chair and looking over at me. “Let’s do it.”

“We don’t have to do that,” I said. “I’m sure you want to go on home.”

Casey shrugged. “All I have waiting for me at home is being alone, and *my* kitchen is still under renovation anyway. I’d love to watch Die Hard, if you want to.”

There’s nothing else I’d rather do, I thought.

“Fine,” I said.

Casey snorted. “Don’t act too excited about it.”

I got up from my chair, trying to bite back a smile. “I *am* too excited about it. I thought I was just going to pass out early tonight, and now I get to hang out with you and watch Bruce Willis be a badass.”

Casey liked my living room as much as he’d liked the kitchen, asking a million little questions about all of the pictures on the wall and books on my shelves. I popped Die Hard on the TV, I tossed Casey a big blanket, and we settled in on the couch.

I made sure to sit a good distance away from him on the couch. I was hyper-aware of his proximity to me anyway, perpetually drawn to him like some forbidden magnet. But as we kept watching, Casey shifted a few times, each time ending up closer and closer to me.

I couldn’t stop looking his way. I tried to focus on the movie I’d seen a hundred times before, but it was no use.

And when Casey finally nudged over my way just enough, gently resting the side of his body against mine, my heart went into overdrive.

“Casey?” I said softly, shifting to face him.

I saw that he was drifting off to sleep. His eyes blinked slowly as he looked up at me.

“*Mmm*,” he hummed, clearly only half awake. He snuggled up against the side of me even closer, and I felt like my heart was about to burst. “Sorry,” he murmured.

“Don’t apologize,” I told him in a low whisper. I pulled in a slow breath and reached for his blanket, bringing it over and covering both of us with it.

I relented.

I let myself pull him in against my body, holding him like he belonged here.

“You feel so good,” he said softly, his voice heavy with sleep.

“You feel good to me, too, Casey,” I told him, giving him a squeeze. I leaned down, pressing a few kisses to his hair. My heart was still pounding in my chest. I wanted this, and so much more. I knew I might fucking *regret* this, too, sometime later when he was gone and I was left with my own thoughts.

But I couldn't care right now. He felt perfect against me. Warm, cozy, and what I'd wanted for far too long.

I held him there, thinking about everything and nothing as he drifted off. I thought I'd be awake for hours, but a handful of minutes later I found myself way too comfortable too, dozing against him.

The only thing that woke me, hours later, was the sound of the front door opening.

A sound that never should have happened—at the front door that *no one* should have been coming in.

CASEY

I woke to the sound of Rome gasping, and when I lifted my head, I saw why.

“Fuck,” Rome cursed as we looked up, bleary-eyed, to see Justin standing in the front entryway.

“I—*whoa*,” Justin said.

Justin.

Justin, who should have been in Las Vegas still, but was standing right here in front of us.

Who was now witnessing me and Rome, curled up and cozy together on the couch, *very* obviously closer than any “friends” would normally be. For fuck’s sake, we looked every bit like a couple, sharing a blanket and cuddled up as close as humanly possible.

I swallowed past a sudden tightness in my throat. Underneath the blanket, my hand instinctively grasped Rome’s thigh, like I was trying to hold onto steady ground in a storm.

“Justin?” I managed to say.

“Whoa,” he repeated.

His eyes were wider than I’d ever seen on him. Back in college, we always used to joke that nothing ever shocked Justin. He could have seen a parade of naked jugglers walking down the street and barely bat an eyelash.

But right now, unmistakably, Justin was fucking shocked.

“I... I finished the Christmas event in Vegas a few hours earlier than I thought I would,” Justin said, explaining himself like he was on trial, or something. As if *he* was the one doing something wrong. “I knew if I caught a quick flight to Denver, I could be here until tomorrow afternoon. I wanted to surprise my Dad...”

He trailed off, looking completely dazed.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

I realized that I was still squeezing Rome’s thigh under the blanket. I let go, bolting up from the couch and tossing away the blanket.

“But I didn’t think *you’d* still be here, Casey,” Justin finally continued.

“I fell asleep,” I said, pacing over toward him. “I fell asleep while we were watching *Die Hard*.”

“I can see that,” Justin said. “Yes.”

“I can explain,” Rome said, but when I glanced back at him, he truly seemed at a loss.

“Did you guys actually hit it off?” Justin said, with a look on his face like he was trying and failing to solve a complex calculus problem. “Good *God*. I thought I was just imagining it, when I saw how you looked at my dad at the Christmas tree lot. But I’m pretty sure I wasn’t imagining it, now. I was treating it like a joke—”

“I’m going to leave,” I said, walking over toward my boots by the door.

Justin’s hand came out to stop me. “Casey.”

“I need to leave,” I said.

I was panicking internally. This wasn’t a situation I ever thought I’d find myself in, and I had no fucking clue what to do.

I was sure that I was about to lose my best friend. About to ruin his trust with his father, too, and the catastrophe of that was too much to bear.

Justin gripped my forearm, stopping me. “This,” he said, “is the weirdest moment of my life, and I can say that with certainty.”

“Same here,” I told him.

“I was joking when I said you should date my dad, Case, but—”

“You said that to him?” Rome groaned from behind us. “Jesus Christ.”

“I was *joking*,” Justin reiterated. “And I am going to be thinking about how weird this moment is for weeks, probably. Years, maybe. Or maybe forever. But if you guys actually... *hit it off*, then I want you both to be happy, I guess.”

I was sure I had to be dreaming, at this point.

“Justin, you don’t have to say that,” I told him.

“I repeat—this is the weirdest fucking thing I’ve ever seen,” Justin said. “But screw it. Sometimes life sends you weird curveballs, doesn’t it? I don’t know, dude. I’m... Dad, can I talk to you alone, for a minute?”

“Yes. Sure, Justin. Anything. I’m so fucking sorry—”

Justin held up a hand. “No worries. I just need to talk with you.”

I nodded. I tossed on my boots, sweater, and scarf, and I was very glad for the opportunity to take a moment on the front deck alone.

Holy God.

The night air was a refreshing, bracing chill, and when I sat down on the short steps, I felt like I had just been electrocuted.

I breathed in. Breathed out. Watched the cloud of my breath in the night air. Watched the dance of lights on the house across the street.

What the *fuck* was going on with my life, this Christmas?

And... had Justin said he “wanted us both to be happy?”

And was it possible, maybe just *slightly*, that Justin wasn't going to stop speaking to me forever?

That everything wasn't completely ruined?

* * *

It was another twenty minutes before I heard the sound of the door swinging open behind me on the front steps.

My heart rate ticked up again. Justin appeared a moment later, slowly sitting down next to me. We both looked out at the lights, not talking yet, even though there were about a billion things I needed to say.

"I just want to say it again, Case," Justin finally murmured, looking over at me. "*Weird. As. Fuck.*"

"Justin, I am so fucking sorry," I blurted out, like a dam inside me was breaking. "I never meant for this to happen, it just—"

He held up a hand, stopping me. "No need," he said. "I'm not mad at you. I'm certainly not mad at him. You know what the worst part is, actually?"

I bit the inside of my cheek. "That I didn't tell you?"

Justin gave me a nod. "Bingo."

"I couldn't have."

"I know, I know," he said. "I get why you didn't. I mean, for God's sake, he's my *dad*."

I winced. "I am a horrible person. But I already told you, and it's true, I didn't know he was your dad when I met him."

"I know that too. But it just made me think about how much I've been gone. I haven't been around as much, and I never want to lose our friendship. It would kill me. Losing you as a friend would be worse than... the apocalypse. Hell, it would be worse than you banging my dad."

My cheeks heated up so rapidly that I felt like I had a sudden fever. "Jesus, Justin, you cannot joke about that. It's

too soon.”

He snorted. “Hey, I’m the one who gets to call the shots on if it’s too soon. And that joke was just too easy.”

“Goddamn,” I said, leaning back for a moment as I took a deep breath.

“Things will be fine,” he offered. “Just be honest with me from now on, okay? I’m a weird guy. I can handle a *lot* of weird things. But I can’t handle losing what we have. Okay?”

“I feel the same way,” I said.

He stood up, his boots crunching on a little patch of leftover snow on the wooden steps. He held out a hand to me, helping me up.

“Now come inside. I have a secret I need to tell *both* of you.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “Revenge, already?”

Justin’s eyes flared and he gave me a wicked grin. “You bet.”

We headed in. Rome was sitting at his kitchen table with a glass of water in his hand.

“Dad, Case,” Justin said, leaning against the kitchen counter and looking between us. “I know it’s been one hell of a Christmas for all of us. But I’m about to drop a bomb on both of you.”

“Lay it on us,” Rome said. “Nothing could surprise me at this point.”

Justin clicked his tongue. “I met a woman. A very special one.”

Both Rome and I perked up. “Is that right?” he asked.

Justin had been a free-love hippie throughout all of college, never even considering settling down with any one girl. I’d been completely convinced that he’d be that way for his whole life.

“Her name’s Natalie. She works at my company. She travels with me a lot,” Justin continued. His eyes glanced between both of us, hesitating for a moment. “And she hates Christmas.”

“No fucking way,” Rome said, shaking his head and leaning back.

“Total Grinch, doesn’t like the decorations, doesn’t like the time of year—”

“How can someone not like the *decorations*?” I asked.

“Natalie is a strong, unique woman,” Justin said, and I could see the stars in his eyes as he said it. “She has a lot of offbeat opinions, and that’s part of what I like about her so damn much.”

“Sounds like a whole lot of fun,” I conceded.

“You want to know something funny?” Justin asked. “I was actually nervous as hell to come back and tell both of you that I met a girl who hates Christmastime. You both love it so fucking much that I knew you’d be taken aback. And now, you both *owe me for life*, so—”

“Hey,” I protested, laughing already. “You can’t hold this against me forever.”

“Oh, yes I can,” Justin said, a grin on his face, too. “And I will. Unless you go easy on Natalie when you meet her.”

“Wow,” Rome said. “It really does sound serious.”

“As serious as I’ve ever gotten, yeah,” Justin said. “Dad, she’s so damn cool. You’ll love her.”

Rome nodded once. “And I will be on a one-man mission to make her enjoy Christmastime. I will not relent. I will not give up. Soon, she’ll be out there singing carols and hanging twinkle lights on her own doorstep.”

“You can try. Good luck changing her mind.”

Soon, we were all sitting around the kitchen table sharing another round of warmed-up cinnamon rolls. I still felt like I

was on another planet, but gradually, as the night went on, things almost started to feel... normal.

Not *normal*, maybe. But some version of it.

I was hanging out with Justin and Rome, and nothing was awkward. We talked more about Natalie, and all of the places Justin had traveled with her for work. Rome admitted to Justin how lonely it had been without him here for Christmas, and that it had been a good call to tell me to bring something over tonight.

I'd spent Christmas with my best friend's dad, and nothing bad had happened.

Really, it felt more like something great had happened. Out of nowhere. Beyond my wildest expectations. Everything should have gone terribly, by all accounts—but instead, it had been like a gift.

And it sure as hell was the best Christmas gift I'd ever gotten.

ROME

“Hey, now, you can’t be wearing *that* tonight!” Harlan said as I walked into Jade Brewery.

He was pointing at my red and white Santa hat.

“It’s my favorite hat, and it’s still December,” I protested.

“It’s December for another few hours,” Harlan said. “You can’t wear a Santa hat on New Year’s Eve, for God’s sake.”

“Oh yes I can, and I will,” I said.

“Who’s that *hot* guy in a Santa hat?” I heard from the end of the bar, and I looked to see Casey sitting there, leaning back and giving me the eyes.

Jade Brewery was decked out in New Year’s Eve decorations for tonight. A lot of their Christmas decor was still up, too, but they’d added sparkly gold garlands everywhere they could fit them, and champagne glasses filled the back of the bar where pint glasses for beer usually lived.

I walked over to Casey and dipped to press a slow kiss to his lips. A flurry of butterflies still hit me every time I kissed him. I knew it wasn’t “forbidden,” anymore, but it still felt like I was getting away with something.

And it still felt like Casey was totally out of my league, anyway.

“Glad you’re here,” I told him. “And you brought company, I see?”

Casey's construction crew, the Fixer Brothers, were hanging out in various parts of the bar. I recognized them from the first night we'd met, which felt like ages ago, now.

"I didn't even bring them," Casey said. "They just knew this was the best place to be on New Year's Eve."

"The *only* place to be," Harlan corrected him.

I sat down next to Casey, making myself comfortable. Jade Brewery really was becoming one of my favorite places already, even though I knew half of it had to do with it being the place where Casey and I had met.

"I got you something," he said as I sat down.

There was a tiny red bag sitting on the top of the bar. He reached for it, sliding it over toward me.

"A gift?"

"A little gift," he told me.

I pulled the ribbon off of the little bag, opening it up. Inside, there was an even smaller plush. I took it out, seeing that it was in the shape of a little cinnamon roll, about the size of a hockey puck, with two cartoon eyes on the front of it.

I puffed out a laugh. "Where in the hell did you find this?"

"Doing some coding work for a company that sells a million different little plushies. I came across this one and it made me think of you."

"This is going right on the dashboard of my truck," I told him.

"I figured it could be a reminder that you're never alone, you know?" Casey said, reaching a hand out and squeezing my thigh. "No matter what happens between us. No matter what all this turns out to be."

"And a reminder that sometimes, the weirdest things end up really, really good," I said softly, turning over the little cinnamon roll in my fingers.

"The weirdest things are the fucking *best* things," Casey agreed. "And we both know it."

“Thank you,” I said. “This’ll make me think of you every time I see it. As if I’m not already thinking about you all the time, anyway.”

He leaned over, kissing me again.

And *God*, I wasn’t used to it. I still felt like I could melt right into my chair from a simple kiss like this. The feel of his lips on mine, the faint scent of him that I knew fairly well by now.

It didn’t matter how weird the circumstances were with our lives—it just felt *right*, being with him.

Maybe that was all that mattered, in the end.

* * *

A few hours later, Jade Brewery had transformed from a cozy little neighborhood bar into an all-out New Year’s Eve bash. More and more people had trickled in over the night, and the place was packed now. The good music just kept coming, and Casey had managed to drag me out onto the dance floor multiple times.

Midnight came, and the whole bar counted down together from ten to one.

“Happy New Year!” the whole place shouted.

Casey’s hands found my waist, tugging me in close as we kissed.

“Here you go, Casey!” Harlan said, appearing near us with a bottle of champagne. He looked like he was on cloud nine, and even he had been dancing like a fool all night with his friend Sawyer.

“You want me to pop this bottle?” Casey asked Harlan over the music.

“Do it,” he said. “On the house.”

Casey gave Harlan a little salute and positioned himself with the cork ready to fly. He moved his thumb and almost

instantly, the cork came off with a loud *pop*, flying out and landing on one of the pool tables by the wall.

And apparently the bottle must have gotten more than a little shaken up while Harlan danced over, because the champagne downright *waterfalled* onto Casey.

“Holy fuck!” Casey called out, his eyes going wide as champagne spewed all over him, down his arms and all over the front of his shirt.

“Oh, God,” I said.

“I am now soaked in about a half a bottle’s worth of champagne,” Casey declared. “That’s one way to get me to perk up.”

“That might be our cue to head out,” I said.

Casey was laughing now. He shrugged, tossing back the bottle and swigging some of the champagne before offering it to me. I had a big sip, too.

“Yes,” Casey finally said. “I think I should get back home to put on some slightly less alcoholic clothes.”

“You two just needed an excuse to get out of here together, and that’s okay,” Harlan said. “Maybe it was part of my plan all along.”

“All right,” I said. “Put your coat on and zip it up tight, Casey. We’re *running* back to your place.”

I’d been partly joking, but Casey put on his winter coat, zipped it to the top over his soaked shirt, and we took off into the night. As we ran the few short blocks back, people were roaming the streets of Jade River’s town square, playing with sparklers and tiny firecrackers and wishing each other a happy new year. Casey and I jogged through the cold air, laughing and talking the whole way back.

It was only a few minutes, but it was exhilarating.

This new year actually *felt* like a new lease on life. Like I was starting over, but in a good way.

Like I had no idea what was ahead, and for once, that was a good thing.

We made it back to Casey's house in record time. I smacked his ass as we walked in the front door, and he stripped off his clothes right away. My cock perked up, hardening in record time. I was ready for him. Finally. With no doubts, and no hesitations in my mind.

"I have to get in the shower and rinse this off," he said, "otherwise my whole body is going to be a sticky mess."

"Maybe I like your body being a sticky mess," I murmured, running my hand down his chest.

"Too bad," he said with a smile. "Come get in the shower with me."

I tugged off my clothes as we made our way to the bathroom, and every step of the way there felt like it took too long. He turned the shower on hot, and the moment we were under the water I knew it had been the best decision of the night.

"That feels fucking amazing," Casey said, letting the water fall all around him.

"Do you always look this damn hot when you're taking a shower, or is this for my benefit?"

"You're making me blush."

"Going to make you blush even harder, now," I said. Casey had been hard ever since he'd taken his clothes off, and I knew exactly what I wanted to do to him.

I dropped to my knees right there under the spray of the hot water. I took his cock into my mouth in one smooth motion.

"Oh, fuck," he murmured, leaning one hand onto the side of the shower. "You are just going *right* for it."

I hummed around him.

It had been too long since I'd been this close to him. For a while I'd figured I'd never get to feel this again. Never get to

make him feel as good as he deserved. But we were here now, and that was the only thing in the world that mattered to me now.

I took him deep, letting the tip of his cock push into my throat a little. It elicited a perfect, deep moan from him as he gripped the sides of my wet hair with his fingers. He started to slide into me, bucking his hips like he was riding my face.

And I wanted to be used like that. I wanted Casey to do anything and everything he wanted to me, and I'd be here to lap it up like a damn dog for him.

"I know I didn't come instantly this time like an idiot," he said, his voice breathless, echoing off the shower walls. "But you're still going to make me come way too fast."

"And I'm fucking ready for you," I said as I pulled off his cock for a moment, looking right up at him. I cupped his balls with one hand before going back in, dragging my tongue across his tip.

I took him deep again, and this time his moan was louder. More desperate. I knew he was going to come soon, and I was here for the ride.

"Fuck yes, Rome," he whispered, his voice a little broken now. He tensed up, his fingers digging a little tighter against my head.

I hummed deeply around him and he must have enjoyed the sensation, because a moment later, he was coming undone. I shoved him up against the shower wall, pressing his ass back against it as he started to come.

"Holy *fuck*—" he uttered as he let go, coming over and over again onto my tongue. I swallowed every last drop, still gripping his hips.

"*Mmm*," I hummed as he finished, his body going a little limp in my hands. I slowly pulled off of him, wiping my lips with the back of my hand in the spray of the shower.

"You," Casey said, still breathless, "are perfect. That's all."

“Don’t know if I agree with that, but thank you for the compliment, nonetheless.”

“Oh, you better get used to compliments,” Casey said. “It’s all I’m going to be able to do if I’m with you.”

My heart skipped a beat.

I’d liked that a little too much. *If I’m with you.*

Casey and I were obviously attracted to each other, but until recently, I hadn’t entertained any thoughts of truly being “together” with him, as a couple.

Now, it seemed like a possibility. One I really, really enjoyed the thought of.

I stood up, reaching for the shower gel and lathering it up on my hands. I washed Casey off, and then myself, until both of us were squeaky clean. After getting out of the shower, we toweled off, but neither of us bothered to put any clothes on before tucking into Casey’s bed.

My cock was as hard as a damn diamond, but I was so fixated on Casey that I’d been ignoring it all night. But the moment I slipped under the sheets with him, my own dick felt like a beacon, drawn toward Casey in a very, very insistent way.

And I got a little impatient.

More than a little impatient.

It was like I was fully thinking with my dick, in a way I hadn’t done in years. I didn’t bother with logistics, or think about condoms and lube, or worry about anything. I needed to feel my cock between him somehow.

So I just moved up behind him, like he was the little spoon to my big spoon, and I pushed my cock between the back of his thighs. Right below the cleft of his ass, his thighs formed a tight divot that was perfect for me.

“*Oh,*” he said, and I didn’t hate the surprise in his voice. “You—”

“It feels so fucking good,” I said, feeling like some animal instinct was taking over me. I didn’t give a damn that I wasn’t buried in his ass, even though I knew I’d want that, too, very soon.

I needed him quickly, right now. And I *was* a little desperate.

He squeezed the muscles of his thighs tight around my cock and now I was the one who was moaning, feeling how well he could grip me like that.

“God, I always wanted this,” Casey murmured as he let me use him to get off.

“No way,” I said.

“Thigh fucking? Yes,” Casey said.

“You are such a liar,” I said, though I sure as hell didn’t stop what I was doing, still thrusting forward, a little faster now.

I loved being behind him like this, too. I had one arm wrapped around his torso, tugging his body close up against mine, and I buried my face at the crook of his neck. His hair was still the slightest bit damp against my skin, and it smelled so much like him, clean and inviting.

“Not a liar,” Casey uttered. “I’ve gotten off to thigh fucking porn before, you know.”

My cock throbbed between his legs. “What? I didn’t even know that was a real thing—I just thought I was being desperate and way too impatient right now.”

“Oh, it’s a thing, I promise you,” he murmured.

He started to buck his hips backward against me now, squeezing his muscles around my cock in a pulsating rhythm.

“Holy fuck, it feels too good,” I said.

“Then come for me, Rome,” Casey said. “Come down my thighs. Fuck up my sheets. I have more.”

I groaned. “You have no idea how hot it is when you say things like that.”

“So do it,” he said, in some combination of begging and commanding me that only turned me on more.

I breathed heavy as I fucked into the space between his thighs, loving every moment of it. This was one of the best things about Casey. I felt like I could do anything with him. He’d never judge me, never say I was being strange. He was up for anything, and that only made every part so much more fun.

We were fun, together. Better than the sum of our parts. And down for any ride.

It didn’t take long before I felt the wave cresting inside me, and I knew I was about to lose it. I pulled his body even closer to mine, loving every inch of heat as our skin touched.

“Gonna come,” I breathed against him as I lost control. I held him hard as I came, biting down on his shoulder, pulsing between his legs.

He let out a low, satisfied sound. “So goddamn hot,” he murmured.

I didn’t have any clue how I was so lucky.

I relaxed. He breathed out. I kissed the back of his head once, and then again, and then another dozen times.

“I am a lucky man,” I said.

“You have to let me do that to you next,” Casey said. “I want to know how it feels.”

I puffed out a laugh. “Casey, I would be honored if you fucked my thighs.”

He laughed, too, before turning to press a kiss to my lips before getting up. “Help me change my sheets?”

He cleaned off his thighs and then we put new sheets on his bed. By the time we were back under clean sheets again, I felt blissfully tired. Like I was truly satisfied, on a bone-deep level. We got in the same position again, with him as my little spoon, this time a little more innocently.

The dim light coming in his window illuminated the room in the faint, multicolored glow of the Christmas lights he still had hung up outside.

“You want to know something?” he asked. “I know neither of us are virgins, or whatever. But everything we do together still feels like it’s a first.”

I hummed. “I feel exactly the same way, actually. It’s strange how you can live a whole life, and still feel like you’re starting over again, all the time.”

“So that feeling never ends, huh?”

“Never,” I confirmed. “And I kind of like it.”

“I noticed,” Casey teased. “You really, really like doing new things, especially when it involves my thighs.”

I squeezed his hip. “Damn right, I do.”

He sighed sweetly. I knew we were both drifting off to sleep slowly, but both of us could also talk for hours.

“I have so much fun with you,” he murmured. I could hear the sleepiness in his voice, but I knew he meant every word.

“I do, too,” I said. “More fun than I knew I could have.”

“You’re my favorite, Rome,” he said softly.

I swore my heart could have cracked into a thousand beautiful pieces, hearing that. Part of me had assumed no one would ever say things like that to me again.

“I know we’re going to take things slow, Casey,” I said in a low voice. “But I’m down to try anything, with you. You’ve brought more light to my life than it’s had in a long while.”

He nuzzled back against me, reaching one hand back to grab my hand and squeeze it.

“We’ll take things as slow as you want to,” he said, “but I’m not going anywhere. And I think you know that.”

My heart pounded. “I know.”

We slowly drifted to sleep, holding each other.

It *had* been a strange Christmas. And I'd done things I never thought I would do. But I wouldn't change a single thing, now. Not for the world.

Somehow, I was right where I was supposed to be. Happy. Grateful. A lucky fucker, for sure. And there was nowhere else I'd rather be for the new year than right here with Casey.

* * *

- The End -

Thank you so much for reading this short Christmas special Fixer Brothers story!

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