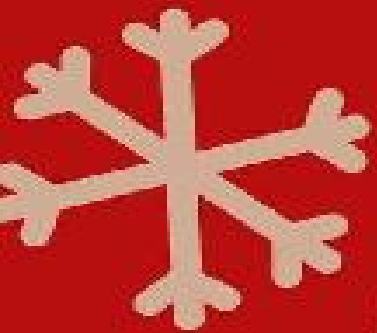


Cinnamon

Kissed



Jacqueline Carmine



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Gabriella

“Dashing through the streets. In my brand-new shiny shoes! Over the crosswalk we go. Laughing all the way!” I sang as I marched down the street in my Louboutin’s. The red bottom heels striking the sidewalk with sharp taps.

December 21st was here, and I was tickled pink that Christmas was only four days away. My first one since moving to Atlanta. I had felt displaced at first, adjusting to the constant influx of sounds. My apartment walls are thin and life in the city is much louder than it was back in Michigan.

Despite always feeling out of place in my small hometown it had taken a few months to adjust to city life. Ambition had taken me far from the corn fields of the Michigan thumb and now with my favorite holiday approaching I finally felt like I was home. Even if there were three calls for snow since the beginning of December without a single snowflake in sight.

At least I could still wear my heels. Trust me, no one looks good in snow boots. They make my feet look like bricks.

Smiling at the jingling sound of the coffee shop door as I enter, I tilt my head back and breathe in the smell of freshly ground coffee. Hazelnut, nutmeg, and cinnamon assault my nose, and I grin as I take my place in line. There is a reason this is my favorite bean shop in the city. It confuses my coworkers that I always volunteer for coffee runs when we have a posse of interns to do our bidding. They just don’t understand that it’s a break from the numbers and the ass kissing that every intern tries to employ.

Minutes later I have my peppermint mocha in hand and four lattes for my fellow worker bees to boot. Standing at the curb I check my phone. I scheduled a rideshare before I had ordered the drinks. Everyone wants their coffee hell hot and while I had enjoyed the brief break from the office, I have a manuscript waiting on my desk. It isn’t going to edit itself. If only.

The car description is a black Chevy Tahoe and the driver’s name is Travis. I scan the street and spot the car parked in front of a dry cleaners. Any further down and I wouldn’t have seen it.

“All these parking spaces and that’s the one you choose.” I mutter.

I didn’t expect red carpet treatment but using the coffee shop’s parking lot seemed like a no brainer to me.

I might not be a southern bell, but I have mastered the art of passive

aggression. As I climb in the backseat of the car, I greet the driver.

“Hey Travis! Sorry about the wait but you were parked quite a distance from the coffee shop. Gave me quite a workout so early in the day.” I smile as I buckle myself in and look up to see the man staring.

He is wearing black slacks and a navy-blue button-down shirt, and he has chestnut brown hair that is shaved on the sides and tousled into messy waves stopping just above his ears. The stubble peppering his jaw is a shade lighter. His blue eyes stare at me as though he is attempting to burn a hole in my forehead.

Despite his unfortunate personality he is a gorgeous man. The type that should be on magazine covers and starring in Gillette commercials, not working as an independent contractor driving strangers around the city. I am completely jealous that his skin looks better than mine. I am currently using a new moisturizer that promises to repair sun damaged skin. Meanwhile this suntanned stranger probably doesn't even use sunscreen. Infuriating.

We both are quiet for a moment before I notice his phone mounted on the dashboard is in the middle of an update.

“Oh, my bad.” I apologize and rattle off the office's address. Memorized thanks to rideshares and food deliveries. Seeing his blank look, I quickly add, “It's actually right across the street from that new Thai restaurant if that helps. Or I could just give you directions if you prefer.”

“No. That's alright.” He finally replies.

As he finally pulls away from the curb and begins driving, I take a deep breath. Awkward encounters are my least favorite part of rideshares. I take a deep drink and let the Christmas in a cup bring me back into the moment. Five minutes later we are almost back at the office when my phone rings. Glancing at the screen I see that it's an unknown caller.

Prepared for the usual prerecorded message about my nonexistent car's extended warranty I answer.

“Hello.” Polite but bored, circa my call center job during college.

“Hi, is this Gabriella Reid?” A breathy male voice greets me.

“Yes, it is. Who is this?” I reply.

“Sorry to bother you but, I'm Travis, your driver. Just wanted to apologize for the delay, traffic was a nightmare on the way over, but I'm outside the coffee shop now and I'm ready whenever you are.” He says.

“Uh.” I begin, “I'm sorry but I've made other plans. Sorry for wasting your time.”

“Oh no, that’s okay. I was late. Have a blessed day.” He says as he hangs up. I feel shame color my cheeks. Glancing out the window I note that we are still going the correct way to my office. Luck is on my side. It doesn’t look like I have gotten into a killer’s car. Hell I am lucky he hasn’t thrown me out of his car or yelled at me. He has taken my presence in stride without fussing. I have practically taken him hostage.

It takes another minute of me guzzling my mocha for strength before I can address the random stranger who I have forced to drive me to work.

“Thank you for driving me.” I say. “I’m sorry about the mix up.”

“You’re welcome.” He says.

“You know you really should have told me you weren’t my driver.” I can’t resist saying. Honestly, he could have said *anything*. Anything to prevent this embarrassing disaster.

“Well, it’s not every day that a beautiful woman climbs inside my car and berates me for giving her a workout.” He replies with a grin.

Feeling my face warm for the second time, I count myself lucky that my embarrassment is mild. I can’t blame this man for my mistake. No matter how tempting it is to shift the blame off my shoulders and onto his. I am fortunate he is kind enough to drive me back to work.

“Here we are.” The man says as he parks in front of my office building.

“Thanks again.” I say reaching into my purse and grabbing my wallet. Thumbing through, I select a few bills that cover what I would have paid Travis. Despite his protests I force the money into his hand. I notice as I grab his hand that he has thick calluses on his palms.

“This really ain’t necessary.” He argues. “I was going this way anyway.”

“I forced myself into your car. This should cover gas.” I insist.

Grabbing the door handle I am turning to exit when he spins around and drops the money back into my purse.

“You have to let me pay you back!” I yell.

“Why is this so important to you?” He yells back. “I’m just trying to be nice! Ain’t that what Christmas is all about?”

“Well yes. But I was so rude to you!” I say.

For a moment we stare at each other, neither willing to back down. I see tan skin peaking through the unbuttoned collar of his shirt, and it distracts me for longer than I will ever admit.

“You know what? Let me buy you dinner then.” I say, waiting for him to scoff at my invitation. I blame the shirt.

For another moment he doesn't speak. His eyes dip to look at my legs and then slowly rise back to my face. He doesn't even bother to hide the fact he is checking me out. My cheeks began to burn as he remains silent.

"Text me when you leave work. You look like the type to burn the midnight oil." He says as he whips out a business card and a pen, quickly scrawling out his personal number on the back.

"I'll meet you here." He says, handing me the business card.

Nodding and refusing to make eye contact I quickly scramble out of his SUV with a quick, "See you later."

Oliver

I waited for the petite redhead to enter the office building before pulling back into traffic. She was something else. My brain had short circuited when she had climbed into the back seat.

Her red hair was pinned up with just a few strands framing her face. Bright blue eyes were framed by large glasses and when she turned her gaze to mine she was all business. Even with a smile on her face she was direct and demanding. She was dressed in business professional with her sweater and pencil skirt, but those heels were tall stilettos. The kind she could wear to dinner and to bed.

It is really no surprise I caved and drove her back to her job. The entire ride I was cursing myself as a fool. The attractive woman bossing me around had flipped a switch I didn't know I had. Any other time I would have explained the mix up and politely asked the unwanted passenger to escort themselves to the sidewalk.

With her I was tongue tied. I didn't even laugh when her actual driver called her. A small smile had stretched across my face before I could stop it. I had to tilt my chin to keep her from seeing it in the rearview mirror. But as I contained my humor, I saw her cheeks flush with embarrassment and guilt stripped away my smirk.

Her arrogance had drained away, and I was left with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Glancing in my rear-view mirror I saw her fidgeting with her coffee cup and the strap of her purse. I didn't want her to lose that self-assured attitude.

Like the world was hers for the taking and it just didn't know it yet.

Then she tried to pay me. All her arrogance surging to the front like it had never left. Like I was going to take her money for a five-minute ride. My mother would have skinned me and framed my hide.

Her purse was Prada, a twin to my sister Penelope's. My brother-in-law had complained a little too loudly about the price. Pen had gone back and bought the same purse in a different color out of spite and given a third one to our mom.

Darren never complained about a price tag again. Wise man.

The red bottomed shoes and designer handbag were dead giveaways that my feisty little stowaway was into the finer things. Probably spent more on her

clothing than her rent. The type of girl I would never date.

Until now.

I was trying to be smooth when dropping her off at the office building. I was gonna give her my business card and invite her out for a drink. But first we had fought over her paying me. Utterly ridiculous. And then she beat me to the punch.

Her dinner invitation was unexpected to say the least. Never thought I would meet my match outside a coffee shop. I didn't even get her name, or properly introduce myself.

Merging my SUV onto Peachtree Boulevard I remind myself that at least she has my business card. Glancing at my phone on the dash I wonder how long it will take her to reach out.

Gabriella

Oliver Greene is the chief financial officer of Greene Agriculture according to his business card. A quick google search confirmed his identity, and not much else. The man doesn't have any social media accounts. Just a few articles in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution with a few quotes about growing the company from a small family-owned business into the national brand it is now. Apparently, Oliver's father had started cutting grass as a child and worked as a landscaper in his teens before starting the business in his late twenties. From there it was a slow build until eventually Oliver took over and expanded.

All signs point to a wholesome well-rounded family-oriented man. He had complied with my demands and been a gentleman even when I was in the wrong. Absolutely not my type. I don't date finance guys. I don't date nice guys. Since moving to Atlanta, I haven't dated period. But here I was asking a random man on a date. I'm going to blame it all on the holiday spirit. It has gotten into my head and made me act like I'm in a Hallmark movie. Bunch of nonsense.

Doesn't stop me from texting him.

I'll be done around seven.

A few minutes later my phone dings.

I'll be there.

One dinner can't hurt. I owe him after all. And that button down was deliciously tight when he had twisted around to talk to me in the car. No, one dinner couldn't hurt. I thought about texting him again but decided against it. I could properly introduce myself in person.

It's ten after seven when I walk out of the office building. I didn't have time to glance around before he was standing in front of me holding his hand out.

"Oliver Greene. At your service." He says as he takes my hand in his and raises it to his lips to brush a light kiss across my knuckles.

"Gabriella Reid. Pleased to meet you. Officially that is." I reply, cursing myself for my awkward introduction.

“I noticed you don’t have an accent.” He says as he continues to hold my hand.

“You don’t have much of one either.” I counter with a smile.

“I thought we would check out that Thai place you mentioned.” He says, “Nice public place without having to get into a stranger’s car yeah?”

I feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment. His grin says it all. He brings his other arm over our joined hands and tucks my hand into the crook of his elbow. We begin walking down the street towards the crosswalk.

“At least I didn’t kidnap you.” I say. I’m trying to play it off, but his grin sticks, and I’m beginning to feel like a mouse trapped between a cat’s paws.

“Technically I would argue that you did.” He replies.

“How did I kidnap you?” I ask as I look him over. The man stands over six feet and looks to be in good shape. Even if it isn’t all muscle, he still outweighs me. And I’m betting on the muscle. His fleece jacket fits his arms and chest snugly, and his slacks grip his thighs like a second skin.

“I considered you to be armed and dangerous when you climbed into my car and demanded I drive you back to work. Those shoes could easily be considered a lethal weapon.” He says glancing down at my heels, “They do criminal things to a man’s body.”

“Oh shush. They’re just shoes.” I say with a smile. I love fashion and I dress to please myself. But I’m pleased by the compliment all the same.

“Said no woman ever.” He replies.

“They are my favorite pair.” I confess.

A celebratory purchase when I received my first paycheck. It’s not the price tag that makes them my favorite although they are the most expensive pair of shoes I own. They’re the symbol of my success. Black leather with that famous red makes a hell of a statement.

“I probably should have asked if you even like Thai food.” He says scratching the back of his head with a sheepish look on his face.

“There is only so much coffee and sugar I can have before I require real food, and Thai is right up there with my mother’s roast.” I say.

“Have you eaten here before?” He asks as he opens the front door that proclaims the restaurant to be named *Just Thai*.

“No, not yet. My coworkers have been raving about the curry though.” I say as we queue in line to be seated.

“My guilty pleasure is peanut butter chicken.” Oliver says.

“That sounds good too.” I say.

“Would you like to split entrees?” He asks.

“You don’t mind?” I ask in return.

“Not at all. But if you steal food off my plate, we’re at war.” He replies.

“Noted.” I say as the host waves us forward and directs us to a window table. The wooden table and benches are a pale oak worn smooth from use. And the pendant light hanging above the table casts a warm light around us. Glancing about I notice several framed black and white photos hanging on the walls and the back wall has a vibrant painting of Bangkok at night. Bright neon lights highlighting the river and the skyline.

The host hands us our menus and dashes back to his stand. Oliver waves the menu and asks, “Do we even need these?”

“Yes, I need to scope out the dessert selection.” I say.

“Coconut pudding?” He asks.

“Or fried banana with ice cream.” I reply.

“Both?” He asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Both is good.” I agree.

Splitting the meal was the perfect idea. From the curry and peanut butter chicken to the dessert everything was delicious. I wasn’t surprised in the least after all the rave reviews I had heard in the office. What had surprised me was Oliver’s interest in my life. I had invited him to dinner on a whim and had half expected him to ghost me.

It wouldn’t have been the first time it had happened. Or the tenth. Dating in the modern era is a constant uphill battle. Online profiles are a nightmare and maintaining interest and conversation via blocks of text has never been my strong suit.

Time seemed to speed past me as I ate dinner with Oliver. As cold and detached as he was in the car, he is as warm and open now.

“Do you want to move back?” He asks after I tell him about my recent move to the city.

“No, absolutely not! I may have been raised in the country, but I was born for the city. My heels can’t be worn in corn fields.” I say with a laugh.

“What about your family? Surely you miss them.” He replies.

Thinking of my parents who are currently aboard a cruise ship headed for Cozumel, I shake my head.

“We’ve never been close. I have two younger sisters and I was the last to move out.” I explain. “I might fly up next Christmas or for my mom’s birthday but for now I think we’re all enjoying the space.”

He wears a frown as he takes another bite of curry. Jumping at the chance to change the topic I say, “Since you gave me your business card, I did an internet search.”

Looking unbothered he nods. Of course, he wouldn’t be surprised in this day and age. Everyone has a digital footprint. Even if his is tiny and impersonal.

“I saw that you work for the family business. Does it help keep your family close?” I ask before spearing a piece of chicken with my fork.

“Yes and no.” He begins, “I started out working as a landscaper part time while I went to college. My father had higher expectations of me than any of his other workers. He’s always been my biggest critic and will never give an inch. Naturally, I am just as stubborn. My mother had to knock our heads together a couple of times.”

He takes another bite of his curry and then continues, “I reckon when my little sister joined, it took his focus away from me. At least until I started handling the books.”

“Surely he was happy to have you take something off his plate?” I ask.

“Not at first. His accounting was a mess. He had receipts and bills scattered around his office in a way that made sense to him and only to him. And that was the least of it.”

Chewing on my curry I think about the similarities we have as the eldest children of our families. The pressure to succeed and to lead by example.

“My parents were disappointed that I went after a college degree when I could have entered a trade instead. It’s always been about money for them, and my sisters make more money than I do.” I share.

“Money ain’t everything.” Oliver is quick to reply.

“Rich coming from a finance guy.” I counter.

“Don’t get me wrong, budgeting is my career.” He says as we finish our entrées and wait for our dessert. “But you can’t attach happiness to money.”

“No, you can’t. I wouldn’t have been successful in either of their trades. They love getting dirty and making things with their hands. Construction and fabricating suit them well.”

“I can’t imagine you on a jobsite.” He says and I don’t take it personally. My littlest sister asked me to help her find a wedding dress and if I ever build a house, she will have the winning bid. We complement each other well.

“Only to bring them coffee or lunch.” I reply.

“I bet you were the cutest one on site.” Oliver says with a wink.

I feel my cheeks grow warm and I look down finding it too hard to meet his

gaze. I have always been terrible at overt flirting.

Swallowing down my embarrassment I take a deep breath and look back up to find Oliver staring at me with an intensity I wasn't prepared to see.

"Thank you." I say in what I hope is a normal tone. By the smirk on his face, I judge it to have failed spectacularly.

"Whatever happened to the brazen woman who demanded I take her to dinner after she commandeered my car?" He asks with a wide grin on his face.

I resist the urge to fiddle with my napkin or spoon as I strive to ignore how wicked he looks when he smiles.

"She was a mythical creature only summoned when Christmas cheer and peppermint mochas are available."

His grin can't get any wider and I'm struggling to focus on anything other than his bright smile. I'm allowed a brief reprieve when the waiter brings us our dessert.

"She was magnificent." He says, "But I think Gabriella is cuter."

"Stop that!"

"Not a snowball's chance in hell darlin'."

His southern drawl hits harder on the endearment than I consider fair. I've never been a woman to swoon over an accent, but the soft cadence of his voice is affecting my train of thought.

I dig into my pudding with gusto. I've never been fond of strange men using pet names but here I am melting into goo when this one does. I haven't even known him for a full twenty-four hours.

Our dessert is gone in a blink and when I go to grab my purse to pay, he flashes me his phone screen showing he already paid online. I tried to protest but he refuses to let me repay him. Again.

Next thing I know Oliver is escorting me out of the restaurant. I don't have time to offer to call myself an Uber before he's holding the passenger door of his SUV open for me and I'm telling him my address.

I can't put into words exactly why I feel safe with him. It's just a knowing that I sense deep in my bones.

"You got an apartment in a nice neighborhood." Oliver says as we pass yet another street with Peachtree in the name. Atlanta loves its peaches. Shoves them in your face they love them so much.

"Thanks. Moving across the country was scary enough but renting an apartment sight unseen was worse." I reply with a grimace.

You can't trust anything you see online. But I tried to find the best apartment in my price range that had enough reviews to seem legitimate. The maintenance crew were mentioned by name several times which gave me the confidence to put in an application and my due diligence paid off.

Larry has already been to my apartment to replace a light bulb. If I had a ladder that could reach the recessed lighting, I would have done it myself. The old man was sweet and pleased as punch that I offered him a pop. Coke. I offered the man a coke.

The girls at the office tease me every time I call it pop. It's all good fun but I'd rather not stick out like a sore thumb *all* the time.

The streetlights cast a warm glow on Oliver's face as he drives through the city. Traffic is heavy but it begins to thin out the closer we get to my building.

"Where do you live?" I ask in an attempt to keep the conversation going.

He gestures to the backseat where he had thrown his jacket.

"My wallet is in the pocket. Check my license."

Shrugging off his weird response I grab the jacket and check.

99 Wallace Avenue Apt 29a.

"We're neighbors?" I ask already knowing the answer. He doesn't just live in my neighborhood. We live in the same building only on different floors.

Oliver

Fate. It has to be.

My grandpa told me the story of how he met my nana at least a hundred times over. Little details had changed as the years flew by. Small things fading from his memory, but the big picture had never changed. He had known from the moment he saw her that they were meant to be until the end.

I always thought it was an embellishment but now I finally understand.

She had taken my breath away when she got into my car. Stunned me nearly speechless and now I'm sure she has my heart too.

I barely know anything about her past or her family. But I know the way she looks down when she's embarrassed. The way that she likes chivalrous gestures even though she's hellbent on proving her independence as a woman.

She is holding her own in a strange city and that takes courage. Gumption as my grandpa would say. I think he would have liked her.

I was raised just outside of the same city where I now live and work. College was local too. I thought of moving away at eighteen like everyone else. Finally an adult, I wanted to get as far away from my old man as I could.

An apartment the town over was the ticket. Until the commute became unbearable.

But Gabi moved over eight hundred miles away from everything she had ever known. And it landed her right next to me. A sign if ever I saw one.

She is ballsy and prim in her tight little skirt that grips her thighs and her heels that make her legs look fantastic. She's a fireball packed into a tiny package, and I'd be a fool not to see her for the gift she is.

After we leave the restaurant, I don't give her the opportunity to call a rideshare. This is a date and I have always been a gentleman. I picked her up and I'll drive her home.

Not to mention do my damned best to steal a kiss.

And secure a second date.

When I ask for her address, I choke back a laugh. She's lived in my building for months and I've never seen her once. I could've had this woman in my life since July. I could've let my niece drag her out trick or treating on Halloween and brought her to Thanksgiving dinner to meet my mom. Fate may have handed her to me, but it sure had a long laugh first.

Gabriella

“What are the odds?” I murmur as I stare at the address printed right next to his picture.

He looks good even on his license and it’s not fair. Mine was taken on a rainy day and despite my best efforts my picture is sporting a frizzy halo. His hair is styled to perfection and his polite but bored smile still outshines the grin on mine. Rude.

“So low it’s ridiculous.” Oliver replies with a grin, “Also I don’t do math off the clock.”

Looking at him as he pulls into the parking garage, I can’t help but giggle. The little giggle turns into a full laugh and then I’m bent over wheezing. I can feel his eyes on me, and I just know he thinks I’m crazy now.

Finally, when I am able breathe, I turn back to him and find him looking at me with a warm smile.

“I know my joke wasn’t that funny.” He says.

“No. It’s just ridiculous that I moved away from a small town where I probably would’ve dated the boy next door. And yet here I am in a city with over six million people and the first guy I go on a date with is my neighbor.” I tell him.

His smile widens back into that grin. His teeth are straight and white but one of his canines overlaps its neighboring incisor. It makes him look more like a country boy than the CFO of a major company.

“You can take the girl from the small town but not the small town from the girl.” He says with a chuckle.

As I grab the handle he reaches over and swats my thigh.

“Wait.” He orders as he climbs out of the SUV and walks over to my side to open my door.

A shiver goes down my spine and I squeeze my thighs together.

“I’ll walk you to your door.” He tells me.

I expected nothing less. He’s been the classic gentleman the entire night. If I don’t count the slap of my thigh and trust me, I’m not going to hold that against him. Not when I can feel myself getting wet from the brief contact.

“Just to my door?” I tease him as I grab his elbow. The fabric is soft under my hand, and I can feel his body heat through the material.

“For tonight.” He replies. “I need time to cyber stalk you after all. Make sure

I'm not dating a serial killer."

I give him a playful shove and he stumbles a bit more than necessary playing into the bit.

Suddenly his other hand snaps out and grabs my bicep pulling me into his firm embrace. His lips crash against mine and I grab his shirt to pull him closer. He allows me to tug him closer until he's leaning against my body pinning me to the wall. His lips are soft against mine even with the force behind his kiss.

I release his shirt to thread my fingers into his wavy hair and grip the back of his head. With his hips pinning me to the wall and his back hunched over to kiss me I can't help but notice how tall he is. The height difference didn't feel so stark sitting in the car or down for dinner. His hands release my arms and slide from my waist to my ass. A squeeze is my only warning before he lifts me up.

His tongue is warm as it thrusts into my mouth. My legs wrap around his waist pushing my skirt high on my thighs. With a groan he pulls away from my mouth and my legs squeeze tightly around his hips as he carries me down the hallway to the elevator.

"Put me down!" I demand as we approach the stainless-steel doors.

"Why? I can reach your mouth better this way." He refuses with a smirk. His lips slightly reddened.

"Because it's indecent and our neighbors might see." I argue.

"We'll just tell them you had a bit too much to drink." He says.

I lean back in his hold to see his face and glare at his chin when I see his smirk.

"Mrs. Williams will be scandalized that I couldn't hold my liquor like a proper lady." I reply.

"Mrs. Williams was young once. She'll understand." He assures me as we wait for the elevator to reach us.

He spans me gently as he walks us inside. I tuck my chin into his chest as the elevator begins to rise.

"I like the thrill darlin'. If you're uncomfortable, tell me to stop." He whispers into my ear.

Untucking my chin, I met his gaze with a steady one of my own.

"Don't worry about me *honey*. I have no problem speaking my mind."

"That's my girl." He says with another pat and a soft kiss.

As the floors pass by his left hand leaves my butt and slips between us to dive

between my legs. His thumb strokes my clit through my panties in a slow steady motion. I was already dripping when he pinned me to the wall. Now with his hand exactly where I need it, I'm drenched. Each stroke brings me closer to the edge and for a moment I forget we're in a public place. I forget that anyone could hail the elevator and discover us. I tip my head back and moan as his thumb makes steady circles.

The ding declares our arrival on my floor. Two below his. His hand slips away and I unsuccessfully fight an annoyed groan.

With sure strides he reaches my door before I can wrestle the keys out of my purse. I hear the click of a latch as I finally grab them out of the depths of the bag. I jam the key into the knob so forcefully I'll probably need to change locks. Thankfully Oliver has us inside before my elderly neighbor Mrs. Williams can catch us.

Once the deadbolt is flipped Oliver lowers me back to my feet.

"Nothing louder than a whisper, darlin'." Oliver speaks quietly into my ear, "Be my good girl and I'll reward you later."

He slides his hand up my waist, pausing to grab my breast and then grabs the back of my neck and pulls me forward. He keeps his hands on my neck and ass as he leans down and kisses me.

When our mouths break apart his hand leaves my ass and slips under my sweater to slide his palms against my hips.

Oliver's eyes are fixed on mine as his hand slides up to cup my breast through my bra. I release his shirt to grab his hair and use my grip to pull his mouth to mine again. He finds the front clasp on my bra and with a flick of his finger my breasts are free of the confining fabric. The soft wool of my sweater brushes my nipples and as they harden, he grabs my breast and squeezes it gently. I moan into his mouth. As soon as the sound is out his hand leaves my breast and swats my right butt cheek.

"Quiet darlin'. Someone will hear you." He drawls quietly into my ear.

I snag his arm to pull him towards my bedroom, but I frown when he doesn't budge. His eyes burn with longing as he shakes his head.

"I promised you the door." He says.

I want to strangle this man. It takes all the decency I have within me not to scream at him. This gentleman who makes me burn hotter than the Georgian sun in August.

Gazing up I let my mouth form a pout as I trail my hand slowly up his shirt covered chest.

“You also promised me a reward.” I remind him.
For a moment I can see temptation flare in his eyes, but he quickly grabs me into a fierce hug.
“I didn’t tell you when I would reward you though.” He says.
“Well then,” I begin, “When do I get my reward?”
My hands have a mind of their own playing with the belt at his waist.
“Tomorrow night. I’m going to take you dancing at my favorite bar. If you’re free of course.”
“I should be done with work at 7 again.” I tell him.
“I’d like to pick you up at your door. It’s only proper.”
“Was what we did in that elevator proper?”
“Absolutely not.” He says with a wide grin, “But I imagine that little tidbit won’t make it into the story of how we met.”
“Only the proper bits.” I bite my lip to stifle my returning smile.
“Exactly. Proper today.” He says as he leans in close to brush his lips softly against mine, “Sin tomorrow.”
“I’ll be ready by 8.” I tell him as he slips out my front door.

Oliver

Friday drags by as I crunch numbers and manage my personnel. Christmas is Monday and for the first time I'm looking forward to the holiday as much as my employees. I might not be looking forward to the actual holiday so much as the ability to spend more time with Gabriella over the extended weekend. For the first time in ages I want to skive off work. Unheard of. My assistant would have a heart attack.

I'm out the door at five right behind the rest of them. No overtime for me today. I have a date to prep.

A trip downtown to the florist and I'm sporting a colorful bouquet that the man behind the counter swears is perfect for the occasion. I believe him since I know landscaping, but flower arrangement is beyond my capabilities.

Honeysuckle and blue cornflowers are not a choice I would have picked but he assured me that the arrangement has more meaning than a dozen roses. True devotion to my love compared to the roses simplistic I love you. Bold for a second date but I've always been a straightforward man and hiding my intentions has never been a talent of mine.

During my earlier days working for dad he wouldn't let me use the zero turn. Sitting atop the lawnmower was his job, clearing brush was mine. Poison ivy and briars were a pain in the ass to cut and weed from fence lines. And don't get me started on invasive kudzu. But just as common was honeysuckle growing wild and heavy with its yellow and white flowers. No matter how many fences I had to save from the pesky vine, every time I would collect the nectar.

Drove the old man mad.

Glancing at the bouquet gives me a pang of nostalgia. Take the boy out of the country but not the country from the boy.

A quick shower and change of clothes later and I'm ready by six.

Clicking through channels I settle on a Christmas movie of all things. Quarter to eight and while the Grinch's heart has grown three sizes my own remains unmoved.

Unsurprising.

Bouquet in hand I struggle to walk at a steady pace to her apartment. I even take the stairs in an attempt not to arrive too early. That plan is immediately botched as I take the stairs two at a time.

The elevator would have been slower. But the last thing I need to be thinking about as I show up to her door is how she fell apart in my arms last night. A gentleman does not show up with a boner.

“Stunning.” I say as she opens her door dressed in a tight pair of bootcut jeans with a Jack Daniels crop top T-shirt. Gone is the proper high fashion city girl and now there is a country girl ready to shake it for me.

“Thanks, Oliver.” She says welcoming me into the apartment.

After I hand her the flowers, she raises the bouquet directly to her nose and breathes them in for a long while.

“They smell as beautiful as they look.” She tells me before she darts away to get a vase and I’m given the opportunity to get a closer look at her home. Last night all I saw was Gabriella and darkness.

Neutral tones with bright pops of color. A beige rug but a bright blue couch with faux fur pillows in white and grey. Basic cream walls that match the ones in my apartment, al la renter, but a canvas with splashes of paint in vibrant colors hung in pride of place.

And while clean there is a healthy amount of clutter. Books on the coffee table and side tables, knickknacks scattered across all surfaces and photo frames on shelves and her mantle.

I see one golden frame with Gabriella at the center with her arms around a set of twins. Their hair is a shade of red just bit darker than Gabriella’s and they stand a tad taller.

“So your sisters are twins?” I ask as she comes into the living room from the kitchen.

“Yes, but now it’s easier to tell them apart. Stephanie died her hair black last week and Fiona has been threatening to shave her head in retaliation.” She tells me with fondness in her voice.

“Retaliation?” I ask.

“Their faces are identical, and Fiona says that if she has to look at her face completely washed out by box dye then Stephanie can look at her face without any hair.” She explains.

Suddenly I am grateful I only have one younger sister. If Pen is fighting with anyone, it’s me. And it’s never over hair. It’s always about dear old dad. Or about giving her daughter too much sugar.

“I don’t think she’ll actually go through with it. Fiona is very vain, and Stephanie would have already fixed her hair if she didn’t have such a cow about the whole thing. She hates it.” Gabriella says with a laugh.

Thrilled she is telling me so much about her family I grab her hand and tug her closer. With her pressed against my body I can feel each of her curves. As I lean over to kiss her, I smell the peppermint that has lingered from her coffee.

Her fingers snake their way into my hair pulling me closer and tugging my head this way and that to get a better angle. Her mouth tastes more like chocolate than peppermint and I have to pull away to stop myself from carrying her over to the couch. I promised to take her dancing and dancing we shall go.

Even if my cock is insisting on bending her over that couch and fucking her until she's boneless in my arms.

"Get your coat." I tell her gruffly when she lingers, "We have a date planned darlin'"

"So bossy." She says with a slow trailing look down my body.

Gabriella heads to a room I can only assume to be her bedroom. I would be a liar if I said I didn't want to follow her and do a different kind of dance tonight.

She returns promptly and her puffy red jacket startles a laugh from me. It looks ridiculous with its fur lined hood, like she's on an Alaskan expedition to research glaciers. She cocks a hip and crosses her arms attempting to look upset but her lips twitching towards a smile give her away.

"I'll have you know I bought this jacket in a colder climate." She begins, "Also it matches my boots."

Glancing down I don't know how I missed the red cowboy boots at first glance.

"Well those certainly make a statement." I say after a long pause. It's the only thing I can think of to say that ain't negative. And I've taken too long to make it seem flattering if her frown is any indication. As much as I loved her heels, I hate those boots.

She waves her hand through the air like she's brushing my awkward commentary away.

"You don't have to like all my footwear. You just need to like me." She says.

"Trust me I do." I quickly reassured her.

"Then stop staring at my boots." She says with a stomp of said boot.

"They have glitter." I say. Again not negative. Just a statement.

"They do."

She stares me down, daring me with her eyes to denounce her boots. In truth I

think they're hideous but they're not on my feet. And they'll be better for dancing than the heels for sure.

"So I take it you figured out we're going line dancing?" I ask to try and change the subject.

I'm not taking the bait. Fashion trends come and go. My brother-in-law, Darren, may be a fool, but my father raised me smarter if not better. Gabriella can wear whatever she wants, and I will be proud to stand next to her.

But she's never going to be in charge of my closet. My mother's annual Christmas sweater is bad enough.

"I had a suspicion." She replies with a smile.

She leads me to the door and after waiting for her to lock up I offer her my arm. Without her stilettos she stands just below my shoulder.

"We're going to *Dylan's*. And just to forewarn you, I have never attempted line dancing in my life."

"A southern man who has never line danced?" She asks with a smirk pulling one corner of her mouth up. "*Scandalous.*" She adds in a sly whisper.

"If dancing is a bust, they serve the best jalapeno poppers in the city."

Gabriella

Squealing on the inside I watch as we navigate our way back into the dense heart of Atlanta. Dylan's has a dark wood exterior at odds with the bright blue neon sign proclaiming its name high above the door. No line to get in and no bouncer at the door. Just like the bars back in Bad Axe.

A heat wave hits me as Oliver opens the door and waves me through to the inside. Country music blasting from the speakers and a crowd of people on the dance floor moving mostly in synchronization.

I weave through the tables parked near the walls and find one without any coats or purses. Slinging my puffer coat onto the chair I wait for Oliver to shrug his jacket off and then I reach out and snag the cowboy hat off his head. The simple and sleek black hat works well with my red boots.

He looks shocked that I snatched his hat, but then he smirks. It's not like he has hat hair. If anything, it was criminal that he tried to cover it up. I was going to give his hat back honestly. But with the way he's looking at me all smug, I'm never giving it back. Besides a black cowboy hat would look good with any of my jeans.

He still looks hot as sin in his faded jeans and his plain white T-shirt. His tan colored cowboy boots didn't even match the hat.

I turn my back on Oliver and begin walking towards the dance floor. Suddenly a warm arm wraps around my shoulders caressing my arm.

"It looks better on you anyway." Oliver says with a grin. "And now every guy in the place knows you're spoken for."

My eyes widen as he leans in to whisper in my ear, "Wear the hat, ride the cowboy is how the saying goes darlin'."

My face is hot, and I know I'm blushing from my neck to the roots of my hair. Still I manage to take an exaggerated look from his boots to his face.

"Shame you're not a cowboy then." I quip, "Now dance with me."

I snag his wrist and pull him towards the dance floor. The old wooden floor is scuffed and chipped from wear. He pulls me back for a moment and when he takes his phone out of his back pocket, I wrap my arm around his waist as I wait for him to take the photo. He texts me the shot. I'll probably print and frame it later. Our first photo as a couple.

"I always wanted to learn how to line dance." I tell him as we join the line closest to us.

“Me too.” He says with a laugh.

We watch the line in front of us to learn the moves. We are always a beat late and we often spin the wrong way, but I love watching Oliver try to dance. He has all the grace of a tumbling toddler. Halfway through the first song we’ve stumbled and bumped into each other a dozen times.

Five songs later and we’ve learned some of the more common steps. We might not match the line, but we have some rhythm at least.

“Thirsty?” Oliver asks me during a song change.

Pulling my T-shirt away from my sweaty skin I nod. We head over to the bar and order two waters. By the time Oliver pays I have half my bottle gone.

“How are you not dying?” I ask, shocked that he’s not dripping sweat like I am.

“I may be locked in an office for most of my day during the week, but on weekends I like volunteering to take care of yards owned by elderly people who can’t take care of the work themselves.”

I try not to be impressed. And fail.

“What’s wrong with you?” I ask him while he’s taking a drink of his water.

He chokes and coughs as I stare at him.

When he can breathe again, he glares at me, “Most are on a fixed income and can’t afford to hire anyone. I would have thought you would have more sympathy for your elders.”

“Not that.” I say with a wave of my hand. Clearly, he cares about them.

I raise my hand and begin ticking off my fingers as I list his qualities.

“Family-oriented, chivalrous, rich, and volunteers to help the elderly.” And for the last one I add, “And I can only assume a fantastic fuck.”

I look at him expectantly, “And you’re single? What’s wrong with you?” I ask again.

He stops glaring and looks at me with confusion before he grins, “Well I’m not single anymore, am I?”

I try not to smile at his flirtation.

“That doesn’t answer my question.” I say struggling to keep a straight face.

“Other women don’t see it the way you do darlin’.” He tells me and when I give him another look, he sighs and leans back against the bar.

Holding his own hand up he mimics me ticking off his points as he goes, “Family overrides girlfriends, sexist, workaholic, too busy, and must be a playboy.”

“Playboy? With all that spare time you don’t have?” I say with a laugh.

“Exactly why you’re different Gabriella. No one sees me like you do.” He leans forward and kisses my cheek.

I grab the nape of his neck when he pulls back, and I smash my lips to his. Like hell he is going to get away with a cheek kiss after that line. His lips are soft and warm against mine.

As I lean back to look at him, I notice his bright blue eyes are dark with desire. Foregoing my plan to try these famous jalapeno poppers, I run my hand down his chest and straighten his belt buckle.

“I’m ready to ride.” I tell him.

A moment passes where he is befuddled but when understanding hits, he looks struck by lightning. He grabs my hand and I grab our jackets and my purse as he tows me to the door and then the car. The night air is cold on my skin but not enough to stop and pull my coat on.

He opens the passenger door like a gentleman and ushers me inside before dashing over to the driver’s side.

It’s a short drive back to the apartments and since my apartment is on a lower floor that is our destination. His hands are on me from the moment he opens my car door. At my back guiding me swiftly through the lobby and into the elevator. On my waist pulling me until my hips meet his and all I can focus on is the hard length of him pressed against my belly.

We don’t kiss and I don’t climb him like a vine on a tree. No matter how tempting. Our eyes lock and I can’t look away. His eyes don’t waver to look at my body nor do they dart away to look at our surroundings. As the floors pass by Oliver’s steely eyes hold mine.

The ding breaks the tension and I find myself pulling Oliver to my door. I’ll be damned if he tries to act the gentleman tonight. I was promised sin and I’ll be damned if I get anything less.

My door slams shut a little too loud to be decent at this hour, but I stop caring when Oliver’s mouth finds mine. Warm and willing I’m lifted into his arms as I rip my shirt over my head. His lips find mine again as I struggle with my bra clasp. I love the emerald color but I should’ve worn something easier to slip off.

He pulls back from me with a breathy moan. I can’t mourn the loss before he bodily tosses me away from him. I land on my softest sheets. I’m shocked to find us already in my bedroom. I watch from my unmade bed as Oliver crosses his arms and grabs the hem of his T-shirt and whips it over his head in one move. Every suspicion I’ve had is confirmed. His tan skin is taunt

across defined muscles.

Blue eyes locked on me, and a shiver runs up my spine. Without looking away one of his hands goes to his belt buckle. With one hand he flicks it open and tugs it off. I hear the sharp clink as it hits my hardwood floors.

Oliver's lower abdominal muscles form a distinct V shape right above his jeans. He unbuttons the top of his jeans and then kicks off his boots. All the while I'm laying across my bed still dressed aside from my shirt.

He prowls across the bed on his hands and knees until he's between my thighs. I lean back as he rests his hips against mine. His mouth meets mine and this kiss is slower than the ones that came before. He lingers until my hands grip his broad muscled shoulders. Then he kisses my chin and works his way down my neck, stopping to nibble where my neck meets my shoulder while his fingers confidently unhook my bra.

Chills race down my spine as his mouth moves lower. He licks one nipple before taking it into his mouth and rolling the tip against his rough tongue. The other nipple is pinched between his fingers, and I can't stop myself from arching into the touch.

"Such a good girl." He whispers against my skin when he releases my nipple with a popping sound.

I buck my hips attempting to grind his erection against my pussy, but the layers of stiff denim prevent the exact sort of delicious friction I desperately need.

"Needy little thing." Oliver tsks, "You're gonna need more patience for what I have planned."

"No. You need to move up the deadline." I argue. I've been on edge since last night and I need to release the tension this bastard has been building.

"Good things take time." He says against my belly as he unbuttons my jeans and begins pulling them down my legs. His mouth follows the denim dropping kisses and licks along my legs.

"Let's not rush perfection." Oliver says as he pulls the waistband of my panties taunt and releases it to deliver a stinging snap to my hip.

"Fucking tease." I accuse through gritted teeth.

His teeth flash in a smile before he pulls my panties to the side and gives all his attention to my dripping core.

One long lick between my lips before his tongue begins thrusting in a mimic of what I want him to do with his cock. A cock I haven't even seen yet. In mere minutes his mouth has me arching and pawing at the sheets as fire

blasts through my veins and my mind goes blank.

He waits for my orgasm to subside before he withdraws his tongue and begins lapping at the mess between my thighs. I'm shaking like a leaf in a thunderstorm by the time he pulls himself away from his feast.

"Still wanna call me a tease?" He asks as he wipes his bottom lip with his thumb.

I shake my head rather than answer him verbally. His smile returns full force before he hops up from the bed to slip out of his jeans and plain black boxers. I slip my panties off before he gets the jeans off and I toss them somewhere in the direction of my discarded bra.

As he resettles on the bed, he palms my thighs spreading my legs wide to make room for his hips. The feeling of his bare skin against mine is glorious. My hands are clasped in his beside my head as he lines his cock up with my entrance. He slides in with a single smooth thrust. It's a snug fit and I moan as he begins to move. Rocking his hips against mine steadily over and over. I cross my ankles behind his hips drawing him deeper.

My head falls back as his pelvic bone slams against my clit. He's gone from gentleman to feral and his sole focus seems to be fucking me right through the mattress.

I meet every thrust with one of my own. Needy whimpers and moans fall from my lips as he pushes me closer to the edge of coming. I fall apart as his thrusts stutter and warmth floods my core as he finishes inside me.

We collapse in a boneless pile, and I begin to drift off to sleep when his voice causes me to stir.

"Hm?" I mumble.

I'm tired and all I want is to cuddle until I fall asleep. He seems to have other plans because he plants his hands on either side of my head and lifts himself up to his elbows.

"I should've asked before I came inside you." He grits out. Eyes wide and hair mussed, he's never looked better. Jerk.

"Read the room." I complain.

I wrap my legs back around his waist and squeeze him with my thighs. He looks ready to argue and I'm just ready to skip this conversation and sleep until he's ready for round two. Because I want a second round, and maybe in the morning a third. And for that I need a nap.

"I could've pushed you away." I tell him in my most serious tone. The one I normally use in meetings not when I'm lying naked in bed with a man for the

first time.

“Yeah but-” He begins, and I cut him off immediately.

“I’m on birth control.”

After a pause he nods, and I take that as the end of the conversation. I release my grip on his hips and nudge him so that we’re laying side by side.

“Now hold me like you didn’t just have a crisis in the middle of our afterglow.” I command.

Oliver is silent while I wiggle in his arms until I’m perfectly comfortable. His arms squeeze me gently when I finally find the right spot. I’m falling asleep when he kisses my head softly and whispers, “Perfection.”

Oliver

Stretching out across the jersey knit sheet I bump Gabriella with my wrist. Her skin is warm in contrast to the cool air. Rolling over I cuddle up behind her and wrap my arm around her waist. She grumbles a bit when I nudge my other arm under her pillow.

“You’re too warm.” She complains.

I ignore her. I’m freezing and I’ve found my own personal heater. I fall asleep to her mumbling about headstrong volcanoes.

When I wake up again the bed is cold and I’m alone.

The scent of bacon reaches my nose just as I hear a cabinet door bang shut.

I’m about to slip my jeans on when I notice a pair of grey sweatpants draped over the bed. Grateful, I drop the jeans in a heartbeat. I was *not* going to enjoy going commando in the rough denim.

Padding down the short hallway I’m brought up short by the sight of Gabriella stretching onto her tip toes to pull a jar of cinnamon down from the cabinet. She’s wearing my T-shirt which just barely covers her ass as she reaches for the spice.

I chuckle, stepping forward to snag the jar for her. Expecting a flustered thank you I’m caught off guard when she bursts into hysterical laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I ask while holding the cinnamon powder.

“They’re so tight, they look like leggings!” She shouts as she gasps for air.

I don’t have to glance down to know she’s right. The sweatpants she left out for me are a second skin at this point and the cuff is cutting off circulation in my calf. They’re too short and far too tight but they are still more comfortable than the jeans I wore last night.

Shrugging off her amusement I take over her French toast while she catches her breath.

By the time we sit down at her café size table she’s shaken off her giggles.

“Thanks for making breakfast. I never remember to eat in the mornings.” I tell her as I bite into a crispy piece of bacon.

“I can’t start my day until I’ve had coffee and carbs.” Gabriella says.

She gets up and pours herself a cup of coffee and asks me if I want one.

“Coffee ain’t my thing but, I’ll take a coke if you have one.” I tell her.

“No pop but I do have orange juice or tea.” Her reply comes from the open door of the stainless-steel refrigerator blocking my view.

“Sweet tea? Hell yeah.” I reply quickly.

She leans around the door to meet my eye as she shakes her head with a mournful sigh.

“Orange juice it is then.” I tell her.

The little heathen.

Her wardrobe is fine, I can live with it. But unsweetened tea is where I draw the line. Next opportunity I’m smuggling beverages down from my apartment.

“Oh!” She pops her head back out from the fridge, “I do have Vernors.” She says with a hopeful lilt to her voice.

“What is that?”

“It’s a pop.” She tells me.

I raise an eyebrow as I raise another strip of bacon up to my mouth.

Her barefoot does a little stomp and her hair gets tossed in a fit of annoyance.

“It’s a soda pop.” She tells me. “A ginger ale to be specific.”

Crunching on my bacon I shake my head. “Orange juice please.”

Crazy woman. Ginger ale for breakfast. Must be a northern thing. Not my cup of tea but I’ll add it to my grocery list all the same. I’ll even brew a pitcher of tea without adding sugar. I’ll need to get another pitcher of course. A different color for sure. Like how restaurants keep decaf and regular coffee separate.

“What’s your favorite kitchen color?” I ask as she takes a swig from her mug.

Her forehead scrunches and she asks, “What is a kitchen color?”

“Like a theme.” I tell her, “My mother is into red right now and my sister is going yellow with a bumblebee theme.”

“Lemon yellow.” She says after a moment.

I nod to myself. Yellow works because my current pitcher is red.

I ignore her confused look and change the subject. Our next date. It’s a surprise and it’s tonight. Her skin flushes and I can tell she’s pleased we’re going to spend more time together. Some women don’t like men to be overly invested in a new relationship. And normally I’m a man who cools his heels between dates. But with Gabriella I don’t want her to question my interest or my intentions.

I intend to start as I mean to go on.

And that’s with Gabriella at my side and in my bed every possible moment.

Pulling the SUV out into traffic I drove us back to the coffee shop where we first met. After breakfast we went our separate ways for a bit. I needed a change of clothes and Gabriella needed time to do her laundry. I also made it a point to pop out and grab some essentials from the store. She said she wants to see my apartment and I want to be prepared. It's already clean, but I didn't have anything that Gabriella likes to drink. I spent a good hour in that drink aisle trying to remember the brands and flavors she had on hand.

It was late when we finally met back up for our date and the sun had fully set by the time I pulled into a parking space. But I don't let her go inside. I know she likes her peppermint mochas but only the classic winter drink will do for this date, and I've already placed the mobile order.

Her pout is as adorable as it is fake. I know she likes me taking the lead. She's already proven that in bed and out. I'm sure sooner or later I'll step out of line and that she'll put me right back into my place.

Her face lights up with joy when I hand her a hot chocolate with extra marshmallows.

"Not quite as good as homemade but I wanted them to be hot for our date." I explain.

A short drive down the interstate and we're cruising into a light up wonderland. Gabriella begins to dance in her seat when she sees the signs declaring this the world's largest drive through Christmas light show.

I pay the gate attendant and turn the radio to the appropriate station. As *Jingle Bells* begins to play through the speakers I reach over and grab her thigh. She's vibrating with excitement, and she wraps her arms around mine as I follow the road through the North Pole.

"I thought it wouldn't feel like Christmas without the snow." She confides in me.

Giving her jean covered thigh a squeeze I look over and see her looking back at me.

"Thank you, Oliver."

"You're welcome darlin'. But this is only our first stop tonight. We've got two more scheduled stops on the way back home." I said.

"Two more?" She exclaims.

"Yes. And then I have a Christmas movie marathon planned back at my apartment." I add.

She's quiet for a moment and I begin to worry that I've gone too far for our third date. Her hair is wrapped in a messy bun and for the first time I notice

her blush reaching the tips of her ears.

“Just don’t try to sneak *Die Hard* into the lineup. It’s not a Christmas movie.” She tells me in a fierce tone.

“Are you sure?” I ask more to pester her than to actually get the movie onto the roster.

“No Santa, no reindeer, no Christmas magic? It’s about a man taking out a terrorist group one by one. Absolutely not a Christmas movie.” She rants.

“But it does have the music, and it takes place on Christmas Eve.” I argue. I’m struggling not to smile or worse laugh as she really heats up for the argument.

“No! No Christmas theme and the holiday isn’t needed for the plot to work. It could have happened on *literally* any other day and the plot wouldn’t change.” She argues back.

“But it takes place during an office holiday party.” I say in protest.

“Change it to a Thanksgiving potluck and Hans Gruber still falls to his death.” She says stomping her foot against the floorboard.

Finally I lose control as we pass a snowman taller than a light pole. I laugh so hard my stomach hurts and I struggle to breathe.

Gabriella glares at my form hunched over the steering wheel.

“You’re not funny.” She tells me.

“Don’t be mad. But you made it too easy.” I say with a wheeze.

“I’m not mad.” She assures me while still glaring at me, “But if you play that movie, you can kiss my breakfast bacon goodbye.”

“Not the bacon!” I shout dramatically.

“All the bacon. Gone. Say hello to wheat toast with no butter or jam.”

“You’re the real grinch.” I accuse.

She’s smiling triumphantly as we leave the winter wonderland behind and head for the botanical gardens.

We didn’t spend much time at the gardens. And we never made it to the parade. All my plans crashed and burned when Gabriella pulled me behind a heavily decorated Christmas tree and told me she wanted to see my apartment.

It was a long drive back to my apartment. Gabriella couldn’t keep her hands to herself, rubbing and squeezing my thighs. Her hands wandered while I kept my focus on the road. She drove me mad the entire way home. As soon as the door closed behind us, I was guiding her to the couch. I want her in my bed but it’s too far away and I need to taste her now.

Her giggles stop once I have her pussy bare before me.

Gabriella's hands tangle in my hair and she uses her grip to direct my head wherever she wants. I start with long slow licks trailing up her slit and rubbing against her clit with my broad tongue. Her hands twist my hair tightly and she pulls me closer. I dip my tongue into her pussy and savor her taste as she groans above me. Impatient little brat. I've been envisioning this woman coming apart under my tongue all day long. Dying for a taste. She's not going to rush me. To soothe her I flick my tongue rapidly against her clit for a minute.

Her thighs clamp on my head and her ankles cross behind my head locking me in place. I hum against her lips, and I use my grip on her ass as leverage to pull my mouth slightly away.

"Don't tease me you asshole!" She shouts as she releases her grip on my hair. Long strokes with my tongue bring her hands back to my hair. I wait for her breathing to become loud and then I switch it up.

My mouth goes to her clit, and I suck on it until her back is arching off the bed. Releasing it with a 'pop' I return to strumming her nub with my tongue.

Her nails dig into my scalp as she presses me firmly against her. My dick is already hard enough from hearing her moans and desperation to come apart in my arms. The feeling of her nails dragging against my scalp make it ache.

Gabriella's thighs tense against my arms and her grip goes from strong to crushing as she whimpers. I flick her clit a few more times, enjoying her shivers each time. Finally she relaxes on the couch I can leave her clit alone and lap at her juices unbothered.

"What are you doing?" She asks.

"I'm not done." I tell her.

She raises up onto her elbows to look at me as I dip my tongue back between her lips. Her pupils are blown, and her hair is a tangled mess. I love how she looks right now. I take my time just enjoying her taste and the little moans that begin to fall from her lips again. I linger between her legs as I bring her to the edge again.

When her hands are back to making me bald, I finally rise to my knees and unbutton my jeans. She lays beneath me in only her soft sweater and as I shuck my jeans onto the floor, I see her hands start to play with the hem. My boxers follow the pants and I swat her hands away from her sweater.

"Don't touch what's mine." I tell her firmly.

The soft fabric slides smoothly across her skin as I drag it up her belly. Her

bra is a matching shade of red to her panties. The lacy cups hold her breasts high and tight to her chest with just a little bit of flesh spilling out.

My fingers fumble the front clasp, and she giggles behind her hand. Her giggles abruptly cut off when I undo the clasp and promptly pinch her nipple. Her hands fly to cover her nipples and prevent me from further revenge. Brat. I lay over her holding most of my body weight up with my forearms. Her hands stroke my chest, pausing briefly to tweak a nipple. Unfortunately for her my nipples are not as sensitive as hers.

Sucking one of her nipples into my mouth has her squirming again. I keep rolling it between my teeth until her muscles start to tense.

She reaches the peak of her orgasm just as I thrust into her slick heat. She writhes beneath me grabbing my shoulders and dragging her nails down my back. The scratches only urge me to ram into her harder. Her breathing is ragged, and I speed up my thrusts as I feel my release getting closer. Muscles tensing I try to hold back my orgasm until her nails dig into my shoulders enough to draw blood. I come with a jerk as she clamps down on my cock and screams her release.

It takes a long time for my heartbeat to calm down but when it does Gabriella is fast asleep. Curling around her warm pliant body it's not long before I join her.

Gabriella

“Will you come to my family’s Christmas dinner tomorrow?” Oliver asks as he cuts into his buttermilk waffles. He’s leaning casually against the bar in his kitchen wearing a pair of green plaid pajama bottoms and nothing else. It’s distracting.

Joy springs up in my chest before reality crushes it into dust. It’s too soon. We’ve had an amazing weekend together but at the end of the day it’s still a weekend. Nobody wants their son bringing a woman he hasn’t known for a week to a family celebration.

No doubt there will be photos and I’ll need to be strategically placed near the edge. They won’t say anything of course but we’ll all know it’s easier to cut someone out of a photo if they’re not in the center.

Conversation will be awkward and stilted. I’ve never been good at meeting the parents. Somehow, I always manage to put my foot in my mouth.

“I would love to.” I say as I see his face lighting up with happiness, “But I can’t.”

The happiness washes away like it was never there while he waits for me to give him a reason.

“I’ve got plans tomorrow.” I say, “But I’m free all day today.”

His cerulean eyes stare into my soul for a minute longer before he spears another junk of waffle and eats it. I’m sure he’s going to call my bluff but then he changes the subject like it never happened. In all honesty I’m disappointed that he didn’t fight harder for me to go. But then I shake my head and dismiss that thought.

Oliver might not believe me, but he respects my decision. Even if that decision hurts my heart. I’ll be alone tomorrow on my favorite holiday, and while that’s been the plan for weeks now, I’m feeling a bit gloomy.

“You know I haven’t decorated my Christmas tree yet.” Oliver says out of the blue.

I glance around his sparse modern apartment trying to spot a single holiday decoration. It’s a quick survey and the count is a whopping zero.

“Do you even have a Christmas tree?” I ask.

“Not yet.” He replies with a warm smile, “But I’m sure you’ll help me find the perfect one.”

I tip my cereal bowl up to drink the last of the milk. When it’s gone, I hop up

from the bar stool I've been perched on and rinse it in the sink. Once that's done, I whirl around with my hands on my hips casting a glare in Oliver's direction.

"What are you waiting for? We have a tree to find! Not to mention decorations, because I'm sure you have nothing on hand." I wave my wand in a circular motion encouraging him to hurry. I do have a surplus of ornaments. I own too many for them all to fit on my tree at once.

Oliver makes a show of taking his time eating the last of his breakfast. A sloth could move faster I swear. While he's dallying I open his fridge looking for something to sip on while he takes the next five years to eat. I never pour much milk into my cereal because I dislike drinking large amounts of milk.

The twin pitchers catch my eye first but then the green cans sitting next to the other pop cans draw my attention. I shut the refrigerator door and cock my hip as I regard the sleep rumbled man hunched over the remainder of his meal.

"You didn't know what Vernors was until I told you." I say. It's not a question but he treats it like one.

"I added a few things to my grocery list." He says with a shrug as he uses his last bite of waffle to mop up the syrup and melted butter that has pooled on his plate.

"You didn't need to do that." I tell him.

I know it's not a grand gesture but it's significant all the same. My heart pounds as the ramifications hit me. He loves me. The logical part of me wants to think my ego is blowing this out of proportion but my heart knows the truth.

"There's unsweetened tea in the yellow pitcher." He says as he joins me at the sink to rinse his plate, "If you grab the red by accident you'll get a toothache."

My vision blurs as my eyes fill with tears. I can feel him looking at me and that's the only reason I stammer out, "Thank you. That's sweet of you."

His hands slide under the long hem of his T-shirt to cup my ass. He tugs me closer till he's hugging me and my head tucks comfortably under his chin. He holds me tight against his chest and I relax in his hold as I get my emotions under control.

"You have a big decision ahead of you." I tell him when I wipe the remnants of my crying away. "Green or white?"

"Green?" He answers. The poor man is utterly confused. Can't blame him,

I'm experiencing a bit of emotional whiplash myself.
"You'll see." I say.

Oliver

As I push the cart around the hobby store it finally clicks. Green or white Christmas tree. Gabriella walks lightly beside me. Occasionally she sees something that gets her excited and she skips away to check it out. The space in my cart is largely occupied by the tree she helped me pick out.

A Douglas Fir or so the box proclaims. All I know is that Gabriella loves it and that made the choice easy. She didn't even glance at the white trees on display. She led me right to this one as soon as we hit the store's doors. The branches are tipped in white giving it a snow dusted look. I know she misses her childhood home at times despite all the complaining she does about the freezing cold.

I might not be able to give her a white Christmas, but I can give her a snowy Christmas tree.

One apparently engulfed in decoration if my cart is any indicator. I'll be surprised if it remains upright once she's done with it. The sheer amount of tinsel and ornaments she has piled into the cart could decorate a dozen trees.

And now she's searching for the perfect tree topper. I had the audacity to suggest the first one I saw and that was a mistake. I couldn't care less what sits at the top of the tree but Gabriella has strong opinions on the subject.

Silver and blue star? Absolutely not, it'll clash with the red and gold theme.

Cherub angel in a sparkly golden gown? Never.

At this point it looks like she has exhausted all options. Stars and angels seemingly being her only two options.

It's her enthusiastic, "Aha!" that brings my attention to where she is crouched on the ground in front of the bottom shelf with half her arm buried behind rows of the angels.

She pulls out a monstrosity oversized red bow with golden trim. A sparkling lace overlay makes it even more gaudy than the angel's dress but I'm not about to tell her that.

"It's perfect." I tell her and she beams a mega watt smile at me.

Her arm loops through mine as I steer our way through the aisles to the checkout. I might not be able to bring Gabriella to my family's celebration, but I can still spend today with her. Decorating has never been something I enjoy but if it makes her smile like that at me again, I will decorate a thousand trees.

The tree is visibly leaning towards the right. I've followed instructions as Gabriella ordered me around. Hang this one. Drape this over that branch. Move that one to the back. Yes, we have to decorate the back too! But now my tour of duty is over.

"Darlin', the tree is twisting sideways." I tell her.

She pays me no mind as she opens the next box of tree ornaments. She also seems oblivious to the boxes littered around her perch on the couch.

"Gabriella."

Her eyes never leave the box in her lap. Golden orbs dusted with glitter and red stars also covered in glitter make up the majority of the box. Unsurprisingly glitter coats my hardwood floors. And my woman is hyper focused on her project. Can't see the entire tree for the ornaments in her face.

"Sweetheart." I say attempting to gain her attention once more.

A smile slowly stretches my mouth. Gabriella's been naughty and needs to see the error of her ways. A good girlfriend doesn't ignore her boyfriend when they're on a date. Especially in his apartment.

While she's pawing through the box in search of the perfect piece to add to the tree, I step quickly out of the living room and head to my fridge. Not much for cooking it's usually empty except for drinks most of the time. But Gabriella's cooking inspired me to pick up a few things in case she wanted me to make her dinner. I even got vegetables. The kind that only taste good slathered in butter.

What I want is tucked into one of the shelves on the door. A bright red can of whipped cream. Perfect.

I walk quietly back to the living room and stop once I'm behind the grey couch. Gabriella is still crouched over the ornaments. Like a dragon hoarding her treasure. A tap on the shoulder and she finally turns to face me. Her mouth opens, likely to fuss at me for interrupting and I place the nozzle on her open lip and spray a bit of cream into her mouth.

Her blue eyes open wide with surprise and delight. She closes her mouth to eat the cream, but some escapes and I dive down to lick it off her lip.

"Let's not be wasteful." I tell her.

The ornaments get placed gently on the floor, but she sweeps the empty boxes off the couch without care. Before the last box hits the floor Gabriella has her hands twisted into my shirt. She uses her grip and my surprise to pull me over the back to fall on her. Our lips clash as our bodies tangle. I try to

pull away but her grip on my shirt is surprisingly firm. I place a kiss on the tip of her nose and tell her bluntly, "I can't fuck you with my clothes on."

Her grumbled growl is the only response I get but she releases her death grip on my shirt allowing me to pull it off. Next goes her red sweater. It's soft and stretchy, sparking an idea in my head. But I'm not an idiot. If this is designer and I ruin it, she'll have my head no matter how good the sex is.

"How attached are you to this?" I ask Gabriella as I sit between her legs holding up the sweater.

"It's comfy but I have it in two colors." She replies with a questioning look.

Good. A good little sacrifice.

I grab Gabriella's hands and raise them over her head. Her confusion melts away as I stretch the sweater until it has no more give and wind it around her wrists. I tie it in a knot and lean back on my heels to admire my work.

She lies beneath me in her black leggings and her black bra. It has a front clasp and I'm grateful for the ease of access.

The clasp is undone in a second and then I'm feasting on her breasts. Her nipples are hard peaks begging for my attention. For a moment the can of cream is forgotten but once I remember I reluctantly pull away from her delectable body.

Swirls of whipped cream cover her nipples and she squeals at the cold touch. Her squirming causes her to brush against my cock straining in my jeans. I swallow a groan as she grinds against me intentionally with a sly smirk on her face.

"Who is being a tease now?" I ask.

"Looks like it's still you." She replies without hesitation as she swivels her hips and throws her head back. I can't feel much through the stiff denim but with her thin leggings she seems to be finding just what she needs. Pity, I'm not going to let her come yet.

I lower myself to my stomach, bending my knees outward so that I can fit on the couch. My head is level with her breasts, and I waste no time returning to my happy place. Her groan of disappointment changes into a moan of pleasure as I lick my way around her nipple. The cream isn't as cold now and melts in my mouth as I suck the stiff nub into my mouth. I watch as she writhes against me seeking friction. Her knees squeeze my sides as she attempts to run her pussy against my stomach. All in vain.

Her arms are tense where she strains against the bond holding her hands. She can lower her hands, but she can't grab onto anything. Like my hair or my

shoulders. It thrills me to see her driven to the brink of desire and desperate to dive off the edge.

I continue licking and sucking on her breasts until all the cream is gone. I could continue torturing her, but I won't. Not today.

Today I want to fuck her on my couch until she screams.

I prop myself up on one hand as I unbutton my jeans and lower my boxers until they sit below my balls. Next go her leggings. I tug them off her hips and down past her knees. But I don't slip them off. I don't remove my pants and I don't untie her hands. This is my show and if she wants to accuse me of being a tease then she's going to get what she's asking for.

I thrust into her with one stroke, and I don't wait for her to adjust. I start thrusting my hips immediately driving into her like a mad man. My hand is gripping the arm of the couch, not the pillowing layer that makes it comfortable to lie on but the metal frame beneath. Her crimson hair is a mess. Tangled and frizzy from sliding against the couch with my movements.

Her moans become louder when I transfer my grip from the couch to her hips. My grip keeps her locked in place as I pound into her. Without warning her muscles lock down tightly on my cock mid thrust and she screams as she comes. It's too hot and too wet and I can't stop myself from coming with a shout.

Reaching up blindly I find the knot I tied in the sweater and work it loose. Gabriella's hands come free, and she wraps her arms around my back pulling me close for a cuddle. I drop her sweater on the floor where it joins my shirt.

We lay on the couch until my dick softens and slips out of her. Her sigh is the only acknowledgement in the quiet of my apartment. Her breath is warm against my collarbone and the only sounds in the room are our breathing. I wasn't sleepy but I'm slowly lulled to a deep comfortable sleep beside the woman I love.

We wake up hours later in a twisted heap. My arm that was wrapped around Gabriella's waist is numb and her legs are twisted in her leggings. I stumble to my feet and help her do the same after she removes the leggings. Her bra hits the floor and then I pick her up and carry her to my bedroom.

Her head rolls gently across my bare shoulder as I make my way to the king-sized bed. Its navy sheets make her hair look brighter even in the darkness. After I get her under the covers, I kick off my jeans and boxers to join her.

She gonna leave in the morning because of her plans. Plans I don't fully believe exist but I'm not going to push her. The last thing I want is to

overwhelm her. We've only been together for a weekend, and I can't rush this.

Gabriella

My last-minute dash to the supermarket couldn't be more poorly timed. I told Oliver I had plans and I don't want that to be a complete lie. I may not have any friends in the city yet but that doesn't mean I can't make plans with myself. I had planned out my Christmas weeks ago and Oliver's whirlwind arrival into my life had thrown my schedule into chaos.

Now I need a brown sugar ham and red potatoes. The two things I've always craved for every holiday meal. Simple. On Christmas Eve. What a mess. The crowds are out of control and it's clear that I'm not the only forgetful Freddy in the city.

It's almost not worth going inside. Almost.

But I paid for a rideshare and I'll be damned if I came all this way to turn away empty handed. I'm getting myself a ham with the brown sugar glaze. So help me.

The PA system clicks on, and an employee announces the store will close in one hour. It only adds to the crowd's frenzy.

I merge into the crowd and try not to walk on anyone's heels. The produce section is hopping but I managed to snag some red potatoes without much trouble. Getting to the ham is a daunting obstacle. Children run past me, sneakers squeaking on the linoleum floor. Older men are parked with carts alongside the meat coolers. Clearly waiting on their wives to return with the prize.

In the center of the chaos are two cooling bins stocked with hams. Crowds of people surround both. Some seize the first one they see and leave, others weighing and considering before checking a different one.

"I need at least thirteen pounds Linda."

"It's only for three people."

"I want enough leftovers for a week."

Conversation swirls around me and I squeeze in between an older woman and a teen with a lip piercing.

"Excuse me." I say as I look into the bin.

Two different color wrappings greet me. One purple, the other brown. Taking a guess that brown is for brown sugar I snag the one closest to me. Triumph overtakes me as I read the label. Brown sugar for the win!

It's bigger than I planned to grab but I can freeze the leftovers or give them to

Mrs. Williams for her cat. I could stay and look for a smaller ham but I'm eager to flee the crowd.

The checkouts are full, even the self-checkouts and I'm stuck waiting in line for over half an hour. Luckily, I didn't call for a ride yet.

An hour later thanks to traffic and I'm finally back to my apartment building. I dart through the lobby and make a beeline for the elevator. We've never bumped into each other before, but it would be my luck to run into Oliver when I'm dead set on avoiding him until after the new year. It was hard to say goodbye this morning. He was wearing those low-slung plaid pajama bottoms again and his hair was sticking straight out from a dozen angles. All I wanted was to crawl back into bed with him and snuggle.

As the elevator doors open, I step forward without looking and crash into someone. A middle-aged woman with curly brunette hair in an oversized cat sweater and snug pair of jeans catches me as I stumble. Her yellow purse falls to the ground spilling its contents. My grocery bag hits the ground too but at least the woman and I don't.

"I'm so sorry!" I apologize quickly.

I've always been clumsy, but I've never tried to run someone over before. I blame Oliver. If it wasn't for my pathetic attempt to avoid him this never would have happened.

"It's okay honey. Just a little Christmas craze is all." She brushes the accident off kindly.

I smile even though I'm still dying inside. My face feels hot, and I can't undersell my embarrassment. Dropping to my knees I start helping the woman collect her makeup and wallet that fell out of her purse.

"I really am sorry. This isn't like me." I say, more to soothe my humiliation than to assure her I'm not a crazy person who goes around tackling strangers.

"No harm no foul, really." She tells me. Her smile is warm and comforting. The elevator doors close as we finish picking up her things. "I'm just headed to the store. Like you I have some last-minute shopping to do."

Wincing I tell her, "The supermarket just closed. But one of the bigger chains might still be open."

"Oh no!" She gasps, "The local store always stays open late on Christmas Eve."

Shaking my head, I watch as she whips out her phone to call the same store I left. Can't blame her. She looks like somebody's mother and that means she has a Christmas dinner to cook.

“You’re right.” She murmurs after she gets the store’s answering machine. “My kids are all grown so it’s not that big of a deal. They can live without a ham for one year.”

Glancing down at the ham I’m holding I make a snap decision as we reach 15th floor. An older man enters the elevator and I step around him to talk to the woman.

“You can have mine.” I tell her thrusting the bag out.

Her eyes widen and she pushes it back towards me. “No I couldn’t.”

“I insist.” I tell her, “It’s just me this year, and I bought such a large one. I’m sure it will be enough for your family and really, it’s too big for just me.”

She’s quiet for a moment and she stares at me with her blue eyes as if she’s reading my soul.

“If you’re sure.” She says demurely.

“I’m certain.” I say with a smile.

This is why I love Christmas after all. The common cheer and doing goodwill towards strangers. If I hadn’t ran into her then she wouldn’t have a ham to feed her family tomorrow.

She takes the ham and looks at it.

“Thank you.” She says, “You know it’s not going to be a big affair at my house this year. Why don’t you join us for dinner?”

“Oh no I couldn’t.” I say. I can’t intrude on their family dinner.

“Can’t share a meal with a stranger? But you can give one the ham you braved the holiday crowds for?” She counters and I sense I’m about to lose this battle. “You said you’ll be alone, and I can’t let a nice girl like you be alone after you’ve done this for me.”

The elevator dings and the doors open as I search for an excuse. But do I really want to find one. She’s so nice and kind. And I don’t want to be alone tomorrow.

“Okay.” I say and she hands me her phone with her contact list already pulled up. I add my name and number and she sends me a text right after.

“That’s the address. We live just outside the city. Six o’clock sharp and if you have an ugly sweater feel free to wear it. We really like to get into the spirit of things.” She says as she exits the elevator.

I push the button for my floor and stand there empty-handed wondering how quickly my plans changed. My mother always said I was flighty and impulsive, but I don’t think until now that I really saw the truth in her words. I’ve just agreed to go to a stranger’s holiday dinner.

But maybe I've made a friend.
My phone vibrates and I see that I have a text message.

I'm Sandra btw but you can call me Sandy

I grin at my phone and add Sandy's number to my contacts. Not a stranger anymore.

You can call me Gabby

Only my mother calls me that. Despite our differences I've found myself missing her as the holidays arrive.
I'm seated on my couch in the middle of a *Die Hard* movie marathon when another text comes through from Sandy.

How do you like your potatoes?

In truth she can't go wrong with them. If I could live off coffee and potatoes for the rest of my life, I would never touch a salad. Damn nutritional values and meal balancing.

Mashed but with all the baked potato fixings. Sour cream, bacon, chives if you have them.

Her reply is lightning fast.

Delicious. I love it. See you tomorrow!

Her enthusiasm is catching, and I switch to a real holiday favorite.
Elf.
Classic.

Oliver

Christmas morning dawns bright and early. Never one for sleeping in, I roll over and do just that. It's not every day that the love of your life breaks your heart.

Okay so maybe she didn't break up with me. But still she refused to meet my family. That's almost as bad. I can understand her reluctance but the fact that she's not feeling the same headrush that I am is depressing.

I sleep through the morning and just after noon I finally climb out of bed. I debate texting Gabriella, but I don't want to be pushy. I know she lied, but our relationship is still too new for me to demand an explanation. I'm sure she has her reasons for wanting to be alone.

Alone at Christmas. Her favorite time of year.

I wander around the apartment, taking a shower, and shaving. Strawberries and oatmeal for breakfast.

My phone is stubbornly silent throughout the day. My stomach dances when it pings before I leave for my parent's house.

Wear the sweater I gave you.

My mother's text is blunt and to the point. Holidays are her days, and her word is law. My father may have built the company and I may have sculpted it into what it is today but on holidays it's my mother who is the real boss.

Leaving my white button down on I swipe through my closet until I find the sweater in question. Emerald green with large gaudy Christmas lights attached. It makes me itch just looking at it. I drape it over my arm. I'll put it on when I get there.

Glancing at my phone one last time I don't push the button for the ground floor when I get into the elevator. I push Gabriella's floor.

She's not going to like this.

But it can't hurt to ask one more time.

And if she still doesn't want to go to my parents' house then we don't have to go. We can watch more Christmas movies, or maybe bake some cookies. I have been craving cinnamon sugar cookies all month. A quick text should net my mother's recipe.

Or a phone call. Definitely a phone call if I'm bailing on her Christmas

dinner. A text would have me sent to the ER. I feel guilty for just considering cancelling on my mom. Dad will just add it to his mental balance sheet. Probably put it right below dropping out of Peewee football in middle school. The man can hold a grudge.

My mother will understand, she's always been a romantic. I just don't want Gabriella to be alone her first Christmas in the city.

She told me about her work's potluck for Thanksgiving. Soupy mashed potatoes and dry turkey.

Arriving at her door I knock politely. I stand there waiting but the door doesn't open. Knocking again I wait for a response.

"Darlin' it's me." I say to the door.

I knock again and a door opens. Just not the right one.

"She left a little while ago, sunny." Mrs. Williams pokes her head out into the hall to tell me.

"Appreciate it." I tell her kindly, "Merry Christmas."

Her reply is cut short by a raspy voice talking over her.

"Ethel, they're dancing again! I thought you said this wasn't a musical."

Her door closes and the last thing I hear is, "I said it WAS a musical. You old fool."

The heaviness that was holding me back dispels. She didn't lie.

Even more important is the fact that she ain't alone.

Heading to the elevator I type out a text to Gabriella. She might have plans but I still want her to have the option to join me if she changes her mind. I send her my parent's address as I'm carried down to the lobby.

Gabriella

The driver pulls up to a nice neighborhood. Way too nice of a neighborhood for me to be wearing this ugly of a sweater. Bright green with actual tinsel attached forming a Christmas tree.

Her house looks like something out of a fairytale. A wide front porch leads up to a massive brick manor.

“Gabby!” Sandy shouts as soon as I knock.

I’m swallowed in a hug before I can say hello. Her perfume is subtle and warm and her embrace is just tight enough to be considered snug. Reminds me of my mother back in Michigan before I became the black sheep of the family.

“Merry Christmas Sandy.” I say, “Thank you for having me.”

She’s wearing a brown wool sweater with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer on it.

“No, thank you!” She replies, “Without you, we wouldn’t be having such a wonderful dinner.”

She ushers me into the foyer and offers to take my jacket.

The inside of her home is just as impressive as the outside. Lofty ceilings and large bay windows make the home feel warm and inviting. Like something I’ve seen on the house hunting TV shows I binge watch on the weekends. Sandy’s house was decorated in neutral tones with modern style furniture. I spotted a white faux fur rug that looked pristine.

When Sandy sees where I’m looking, she says, “Never could have nice things with the kids around. Now they’re out of my house and I can finally have the picture-perfect house I saw in magazines. Wouldn’t trade the mud stains and memories for what I have now though.” She quips.

Leading me through the house she brings me to the living room with a wide flat screen mounted on the wall across a large black leather sectional. Seated on the couch is a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair neatly trimmed to flow into a tidy beard framing a friendly face.

“Roger, my husband.” She introduces.

“Love of her life, I reckon she forgot to mention.” Roger chimes in with a cheeky wink.

He stands to shake my hand and while he doesn’t loom over me, he is quite tall and broad shouldered.

His sweater is white and blue displaying a beloved snowman. Pinching the hem between his fingers he says, "I can see you got the memo."

"Much better than a black-tie dress code if you ask me." I say causing Roger to laugh.

"Penelope should be around here somewhere, but her brother is running late." Sandy tells me, "You don't mind if we wait for him do you?"

"Of course not!" I assure her.

"Good. He's delightful just a bit out of sorts at the moment." She replies.

"If that's what you want to call it." Roger argues, "He's making a fool of himself."

I raise an eyebrow but don't comment. Despite how warm and welcoming they are I don't want to overstep and insert myself into their family drama.

"Mom, have you seen the baster?" A melodic voice calls from the kitchen.

"Oh, that's Penelope. Come say hello honey." Sandy says leading me into the kitchen.

Where the rest of the house is immaculate, the kitchen looks like a warzone. Dirty pots and pans cover the white granite counter tops and what looks like butter is smeared on several cabinet handles.

A tall and slender woman stands at the oven. Her brown hair is perfectly coiled at her nape, but her cherry red apron is covered in mashed potatoes.

"Penelope, this is Gabriella." Sandy introduces me to her daughter as if nothing is amiss.

Taking a page from Sandy's calm and collected demeanor I manage a polite hello.

"You're the one who saved the day!" Penelope exclaims joyfully.

"That's me," I say feeling a hint of a blush in my cheeks.

"Don't worry about the madness," Penelope reassures me, "It's all part of my method."

Glancing around my doubt must show on my face.

"Just you wait Gabriella, this will be the best dinner of your life." Penelope claims. "My husband and daughter are at his father's house right now, but they should be in time for dinner."

Leading me back out of the kitchen Sandy stashes me on the couch with Roger.

"I'm just going to go help Penelope in the kitchen for a bit. Feel free to have a cookie dear." She says pointing to the plate on the coffee table where pink snowmen and blue reindeer clearly decorated by a child cover a dish.

“And Roger don’t make her watch football!” She shouts as she returns to the kitchen.

“*Die Hard* is on.” Roger suggests after an awkward moment.

Feeling shy in a stranger’s home I agree to watch the action movie. The man is a grandfather who has probably sat through every Christmas movie a dozen times at least. I can bite my tongue just this once.

As John McClane kills yet another terrorist, I hear a familiar deep voice behind me say “Now this is the betrayal to end all betrayals.”

Spinning on the cushion I look up to see Oliver’s grinning face.

“I don’t even care how you wound up in my parent’s house,” He continues with a shake of his head, “But how dare you watch this without me?”

“Uh.” Is the only sound I’m capable of making as Oliver rounds the side of the sectional to plop down beside me.

His sweater lights up briefly emphasizing the Christmas tree spanning his torso. As he wraps his arm around my shoulders and tugs me closer Roger pips up, “Don’t make the girl uncomfortable, just because you got dumped.”

Confusion causes Oliver’s eyebrows to scrunch together.

“I didn’t get dumped.” He says looking from me to his father.

“Your girlfriend didn’t want to spend Christmas with your family.” Roger says with a scoff, “I doubt that relationship is going to pan out son.”

Oliver’s gaze slides back to mine and I watch as he processes the information available to him.

“I bumped into your mom on the elevator. Gave her a ham. Didn’t know she was your mom. She insisted I come over for dinner.” I spit out finally.

Silence reigns as Roger and Oliver both look at me like I’m growing a second nose. I want to sink through the couch and then the floor when Roger begins to laugh.

“Sandy!” He shouts, “Baby you’ll never believe this!”

He jumps from the couch and damn near sprints into the kitchen eager to tell his wife about the new drama.

“Well,” Oliver begins, “It’s a sealed deal now darlin’.”

He relaxes back into the couch and bumps his forehead against mine. I turn to face him fully without pulling back.

“I just thought it was too soon.” I murmur.

I don’t want him thinking like his dad. I don’t want him to think I don’t want him.

“It definitely was. And I didn’t think you were trying to dump me. Me and

my dad don't usually agree on much." He says as he grabs my nape.

His thumb guides my chin up and he kisses me softly.

"Also you got scammed." He whispers against my lips.

Jerking back I stare at him until he explains.

"I sent my mom the picture I took of us at the bar. Dad didn't know you were my girlfriend, but she sure did." He tells me as his mother walks back out of the kitchen.

"You didn't need a ham!" I shout at Sandy.

"Nope." She says proudly with her hands on her hips, "I've had one in the freezer since October. This is far from my first rodeo."

She looks so smug looking at me and I can't find it in my heart to be mad. I wanted to meet Oliver's family and spend Christmas with him. I just didn't want to seem clingy and overly infatuated. Clearly around this family I'm destined to be the normal one. Roger is second with his faulty movie choice.

"This is kind of tradition with our mother." Penelope says from the doorway.

"She invited Darren to a cousin's wedding as my plus one without telling me."

Oliver is looking at me with a direct and piercing gaze when he asks, "I'll take you home if you don't want to stay. You don't have to stay for dinner if you're uncomfortable." He reassures me.

I see the truth in his resolve on his face. He will sabotage his own mother's plan to make me happy, even at the cost of his own happiness.

Deciding to be selfish I reply, "Oh no, I'm staying. She owes me a meal for manipulating my emotions at the very least."

Glancing over at Penelope still standing by the door I add, "And it had better be the best ham I've ever tasted and *not burned*."

She looks puzzled for a moment before she dashes back into the kitchen shouting, "Oh shit, oh shit!" At the top of her lungs.

Oliver and I share a look before we both laugh.

"Well now that I know who you are I have a few questions about your intentions young lady." Roger says as he returns to his spot on the couch.

"Dad." Oliver drags the word out with a groan.

I try my best to smother a giggle.

"Well I can't have you marrying some Yankee who is going to drag you up to the great white north now can I?" He glares at his son.

"I'm settled here." I reassure Roger, "I video called my sisters this morning, but my family isn't as tight knit as yours."

“You work?” Roger asks point blank.

“Copy editor in the city. Moved here for the job actually.” I reply quickly.

“Children?” Roger asks.

“Dad!” Oliver cuts in quickly, “We’ve been dating for five days!”

Roger doesn’t argue but his eyebrow does raise as he looks in my direction.

“Far too personal, Roger.” I admonish.

When Oliver turns back to face his dad, I make eye contact and raise three fingers.

His smile is brief but smug.

Oliver whips back to look at me but I adopt an innocent expression. It’s far too soon to be discussing children with my boyfriend.

“Now can we watch an actual Christmas movie while we wait?” I ask.

“Of course.” Roger agrees, “And we can discuss obligations and the importance of stressing those to your children.”

“Dad!” Oliver shouts, “It was one season, and I was bad at football.”

“You made a commitment and you let your team down.” Roger continues without acknowledging his son’s distress.

“It was middle school!” He shouts in reply.

Oliver

One Year Later

“Oliver! She’s here!” I hear my sister call from the living room.

Penelope’s watched for her arrival for the last hour. Gabriella was supposed to arrive at one o’clock sharp. But my wonderful girlfriend has the pesky trait of being overly punctual. We all knew she’d be here early.

And for once I’m actually ready on time. Gabriella time not real time. I swear we haven’t gone to a single event without being at least thirty minutes early. And if she had her way it would’ve been an hour.

So I told her one o’clock, and we planned for noon.

Penelope had a girl’s day with her earlier in the week. Katie was in charge of keeping Buster her new puppy out of the shot. My mom invited Gabriella over early to help Penelope cook Christmas dinner. Darren is recording on his phone ever since Gabriella’s car pulled into the driveway. And my dad is keeping me calm. Or trying to at least.

I’m not calm. And that’s okay. I shouldn’t be calm. This day is too important to treat it with any manner of nonchalance.

I hear her heels click on the hardwood as she enters the house.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Sandy!” She calls as she walks through the house, “Penelope!”

She enters the living room carrying her casserole dish filled with ham rolls and she freezes. Her sweater this year shares a theme with mine. On mine is Rudolph and on hers is Clarice.

The tree we decorated as a family stands tall behind me with ornaments Pen and I made as children. Katie’s latest popsicle art is in pride of place and Gabriella’s mom sent one of hand painted ornaments as well.

Standing in a loose ring around the living room is my entire family. Soon to be our family.

My dad steps forward to take the dish from her shaking hands and I walk forward to hold her hands in my own.

“Merry Christmas Gabriella.” I say looking into her bright blue eyes.

Her red hair tumbles down her back in loose curls and I release one hand to twirl a strand between my fingers. Since our first days together I have loved

playing with the silky strands.

“Merry Christmas Oliver.” She says as I release her hair and sink down to kneel on one knee.

Grabbing the ring box from my pocket I hold her gaze with my own. Silence reigns as I open the box and she begins to cry. My hands begin to tremble and I clench the box as tightly as I can to steel my nerves.

“I never was one to put much thought into the magic of Christmas. Bit of a grinch really.” I begin, “But then last year the most beautiful woman I have ever met carjacked me and I’ve been obsessed with her ever since.”

Gabriella’s eyes are red and she’s trying to wipe her tears away with her sweater’s sleeve, but she can’t keep up with the deluge.

“I love you with every cell in my body and I’ve known since the beginning we were meant to be. A bit of Christmas magic brought us together and it is only fitting that I ask you to be my wife on our favorite holiday.”

She’s nodding before I can finish but I still ask anyway, “Gabriella Marie Reid will you marry me?”

“Yes!” She screams.

She launches herself into my arms as I stand nearly knocking me down. Clutching her tightly to my chest I bury my face into her curls as I feel my own eyes well with tears.

I was a little afraid she would say no.

“Congratulations my dear.” My mother says when I finally release my fiancée.

I slip the ring onto her finger taking care not to scratch her bright red nail polish. As the rest of the family steps forward to congratulate and hug us my eyes remain fixed on Gabriella.

She’s been mine since that first day. My own Christmas miracle.

About The Author

Jacqueline Carmine

A southern transplant in Michigan, Jacqueline spends most of winter indoors writing about monsters, men, and the women who love them. She prefers insta-love over slow burn but loves a good groveling scene. She drinks energy drinks daily to keep up with her husband and three dogs and has never refused a good tiramisu. She adores all dogs, most cats, and plants that actually want to live.

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