

THE NAUGHTY LIST



Disagree Abel
CHRISTMAS

KYLIE MARCUS

Disagree-Abel Christmas

The Naughty List

Kylie Marcus

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Chapter 1

Scout

I SWIPED the key card in the hotel room door and pushed it open, letting myself in. Unsurprisingly, the curtains were still drawn, and the room was blacked out. Soft snores drifted from the bed, and I rolled my eyes.

How predictable he was.

I made my way in, grabbing the curtains as I yanked them open, blinding him with bright sunlight. He groaned and rolled over, throwing his arm over his eyes.

“What the fuck?”

“Good morning, Abel. It is a bright and sunny Tuesday morning with a high of sixty-six and a low of sixty-one. On the docket today is a talk show of Christmas festivities. Yay!”

He peeled his arm away from his eyes and glared. “Who the hell are you? Did Darren send you?” He paused, processing my words. “There’s no ‘yay’ about this. I don’t do talk shows, especially daytime ones.”

“Oh, duh. How rude of me.” I boinked my forehead and rolled my eyes. “My name is Scout Jensen, and yes, Darren sent me. We’re going to clean up your act—together. In fact, we’ll make you squeaky clean by the new year.”

“This is a shit joke. Go away.” He rolled over like he was going back to sleep. Not one to give up so easily, I stepped closer and bunched the corner of the bed covers in my fist before yanking abruptly.

“The network is on the verge of firing you, Abel. If you want to be a working actor in Hollywood until you choose to retire, you’ll get up and listen to me. I’m here to save your career.” I paused long enough to let my words sink in, although I suspected he wasn’t taking me seriously regardless. “You have two seconds to decide if you want to continue to be employable. Or should I call your agent and tell him to scrap all the projects he has lined up for you?”

Without a word, he rolled over and pulled the duvet over his shoulder, snuggling back into bed. I stood there for about two-point-five seconds before nodding and walking over to the table laden with last night’s room service. I found what I was looking for—the ice bucket. It was still half-frozen but mostly ice water, which was exactly what I needed.

Picking it up quietly, I walked to the edge of the bed and gripped the duvet before pulling it back with one hard yank. Then, as he turned to shout at me, I did a Dorothy-like swing to soak the wicked witch—or in this case, Abel Clarke, the hottest bad boy in Hollywood.

“What the fuck!” Like a spring being released, Abel shot up in bed.

Rivulets of water raced down his chest, over the hardened nipples my eyes drifted over before dipping to his hardened pecs and abs which drew my attention to the touch of hair right above his boxer briefs.

Of course, he has a treasure trail.

But the most notable feature was the enormous morning wood he sported. With his soaked boxers, the fabric only clung more to the length standing at attention, staring me down almost as much as he was. I swallowed hard.

Good Lord, he could destroy a woman’s uterus with that thing.

Resisting the urge to do a sign of the cross, I yanked my eyes back to his face, not that the view was any less distracting. However, hottie or not, I had a job to do, and I needed to get it done. And I needed this job more than anything. The agency

promised me a top spot with a portfolio of big-name actors if I could turn Abel's career around and get a handle on him. I suspected they were certain I'd fail, but I was nothing if not determined and extremely stubborn. Two traits Abel was about to experience firsthand.

"You shouldn't have ignored my alarm."

"You," he said, pointing at me aghast. "You set the alarm on my phone this morning!" A stroke of genius, really. Knowing what I did about Abel Clarke, I knew I had to come onto the job guns blazing. I shrugged, and he sneered. "How the hell did you manage that?"

I lifted my phone for him. "I have a friend—bit of a genius, actually. She gave me software to mirror your phone simply by being near it. Which I was—at yesterday's wrap party." I smiled, "Plus, your passcode isn't that secure 'one-one-one-one-two' will not keep anybody out anytime soon."

He scowled at me. "This is an invasion of privacy."

"You've been a very bad boy this year, Abel Clarke, and Santa has put you on the naughty list. Only good boys get privacy. Bad boys get monitoring, which is exactly what I'm doing. Think of me as your corrections officer. There isn't a single thing you can do that I won't know about. So, you can cooperate or try to make my life difficult, which will only make your life difficult. Are we on the same page?"

He ground his teeth together, looking like a toddler on the verge of a tantrum. "No."

I nodded. "Yes."

"No."

I smiled. "You don't have any choice. You do what I say. Your days of choosing to do whatever you want, whenever you want, are over. I'm here as—"

"—my babysitter," he cut me off. "Yeah, I got that. But babysitters don't choose the schedule. They're here to watch the children do what they want."

“Not infants who cannot be responsible for making good decisions. Until the agency says otherwise, I’m in charge, whether you like it or not, *baby*. And I say you have a daytime talk show to do this morning.” Since it was after 6 AM and he was soaking wet, out of courtesy, I headed to the bathroom, grabbed a towel, and returned to him, tossing it in his face. “Dry yourself off and get dressed. We have to get to the studio in”—I checked my phone—“forty minutes. Don’t worry about your hair. They can fix it there.”

He stared at me. Was he trying to find a way to push back a little bit more?

Finally, he relented. “Maybe you can invade my privacy with my phone, but at the very least, you can leave while I dress.”

I made a face. “I can’t. Frankly, I don’t trust you. So, I’ll sit right here, and I promise to close my eyes when you take your boxers off, but you’ll have to get dressed with me here because I’m not risking you going back to sleep on the non-wet side of the bed.”

“You are a pain in the ass.”

I nodded in agreement. “Of the highest order. It’s what I got my bachelor’s in.” I gave him a shit-eating grin before turning and plunking my ass into the chair.

I crossed my legs and flicked open my inbox to check my emails. “Tick, tock, Abel. We need to get going.”

Chapter 2

Abel

BACHELOR'S DEGREE in "pain in the assery." I snorted to myself. I wouldn't say she had a bachelor's; I'd go so far as to say she had a Ph.D. That girl rubbed me the wrong way like no other, yet I found sparring verbally with her enjoyable.

She was quick. I'd give her that. It almost reminded me of my improv days back in high school. Being able to come up with stories right on the spot, going back-and-forth with each other, trying not to break the scene or character with laughter ... It felt the same with Scout.

It was easy. Too easy, and I didn't like that either. If she was here to fix my career, she couldn't be a distraction, which was what she was rapidly becoming. It wasn't lost on me that she'd stared down my erection this morning, which is why I hadn't bothered to cover it.

I wanted to see what she would do, and I swear to God she licked her lips, which was not the reaction I was hoping for. I expected her to blush and look away, but then again, in the five hours I'd known her, she didn't strike me as the kind of person who looked away first. So, maybe subconsciously, I wanted her to stare, and I wanted her to imagine what I might be able to do to her with it.

Not that anything could happen, I reminded myself as I speared a piece of steak onto my fork and shoved it into my mouth. I chewed as I scrolled my emails on my iPad, trying to find if there was any communication to prove what she was saying was true about me being difficult.

I'd confirmed with my agent, Darren, that he'd sent her and what she said was true. She was paid for by the agency in partnership with the network. I was stuck with her for the time being. And apparently, I had no authority to fire her—not that she needed to know that.

The screen on my iPad changed rapidly as a FaceTime came through, and I hit the answer button. Why the hell was Kaleb Goldson calling me? Before his character was killed off, he used to be a regular on my show. And after that, he worried his career was over.

Little did he know, his amazing sister, who was also his agent, managed to get him a secondary role in a huge blockbuster, projecting his career into stardom. No longer was he the teenage heartthrob on TV. He was a bona fide movie star these days.

“Abel, hey, how are you? I heard through the grapevine”—he paused, entering a touchy subject—“what the agency’s doing to you.”

I shrugged, trying to play it cool. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

Kaleb made a face. “You can tell me, Abel. We’ve been there for each other for the last five years. This shouldn’t change anything.”

I shrugged again. “It’s nothing. They gave me a personal assistant to work on my ‘image.’ There are some unfavorable demographics, and she wants to help boost my popularity.”

Kaleb nodded in understanding. “Sure, and what about the rumor the show wants to fire you?”

I made a face, unable to hide my anger. “Well, I’m sure you’ve seen the last couple of seasons. Without you, it’s not the same as when we started.”

Kaleb’s eyebrow lifted slightly. “You sure about that?”

“It’s just a job; if I lose it, I’ll find another. It’s not a big deal.”

“Speaking of ...” Kaleb said. “Harper mentioned this movie they’re desperately trying to cast. They’re having trouble because it’s on a tight schedule, and it’s over Christmas, so

many people are turning it down. I thought ... with this new image you're trying, this might be good for you. It will hit the demographic that you're trying to—"

"—Mommy bloggers?" I asked with a smirk.

Kaleb shrugged. "Yeah, well, that's the type who watches these kinds of films."

"Color me intrigued." I picked up my beer and took a sip. "What movie is it?"

"It's called *The Naughty List*."

"*The Naughty List*?" I smirked. "I could get behind that."

Kaleb laughed. "Yeah, it's a Christmas movie."

The room went silent as we stared at each other. If not for the fact I was holding the silence, I would've thought the screen was frozen.

"A Christmas movie?" I repeated, and Caleb nodded.

"Yeah, romance. Christmas romance."

I groaned. "No way, not happening. Not my thing. I'm not adding some cheesy Christmas feel-good film to my résumé. I'm not that hard up."

"Yes, you are," someone said from behind me, and then, in the small box frame of my image, Scout looked over my shoulder. "Hey, Kaleb." She lifted her hand to wave at him, and he smiled as I scowled deeply and then turned to look at her.

"Is this a setup?"

She shrugged. "I figured the news would be better coming from a friend than from me." I glanced at Kaleb, who looked sheepish.

"Sorry, man. It is true, though. Harper *was* the one who told me about the film."

Scout spoke next, "And it just so happens Harper's a friend. After she left Hollywood and moved to Sage River, she gave me a couple of her clients and got me in with the agency, so she was the one who told me about this."

I bit the inside of my cheek, looking displeased. “I’m going now,” I said to Kaleb without another goodbye. I pressed the end call button firmly before spinning around to face Scout and give her a piece of my mind. “If you think for one—”

She touched my lips, holding them shut. I felt like a little boy being chastised by a parent. “It doesn’t matter what you think or what you want. This is my game, remember? And a Christmas romance is exactly the kind of thing that’ll help turn your image around. Besides, did you have any other plans?”

“Yes,” I said as I began to formulate a lie. “Over Christmas —”

She cut me off again. This time, sealing her hand completely over my mouth. “You forgot I mirrored your phone, which means I have access to your personal calendar and the messages between you and your family. I know for a fact you’re not going home. You fly your mom out at Christmastime every year, and you fly her home on Boxing Day, which works fine. You won’t be filming on those days, so you can still have Christmas with your mommy. Until then, you’re coming with me to LA to film *The Naughty List* because my plan is by the end of this month, you won’t be on anybody’s naughty list except that cast list.”

Chapter 3

Scout

“So, is he as hot in real life as in the movies?”

I laughed into the receiver. “Yeah, of course, he is. And I saw him this morning ...” I sighed, remembering the length of his cock in his boxer briefs.

“I saw a dick pic.” Naya interrupted me like she was reading my mind. She let out a slow, low whistle and smirked into the camera.

We gave each other a look before I smiled. “Yeah, *I know*.” I sighed. “I had a dream about it last night.” I don’t bother blushing. Naya knows *all* my dirty little secrets.

“Yeah, you did. Get it, girl!” She goes to high-five me through the camera, but I shake my head quickly.

“No way. *No*. He’s off-limits. He’s my client. My meal ticket. He’s the only way I will get that open position after Harper left.”

“I mean, you boink him, and he gives you a five-star review. Ta-da! Instant promotion.” Naya grinned into the camera, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“You’re putting a lot of faith in my cooch.” We both cracked up laughing for a couple of seconds until I sobered again. “Attractive as he might be, that doesn’t excuse his attitude. He’s insufferable and made it his mission to make my life a living hell.”

“I have,” he said as he walked up behind me, waving over my shoulder at my friend.

“Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.” I gave Abel a tight smile in the camera’s image before looking back at my friend. “I better get going. Work calls.” I hit the end button before she had the chance to say something to embarrass me—because she would—and then turned in my chair to face him.

“So, I’m insufferable?”

“You don’t think your shit stinks, that’s for sure.”

“If I’m insufferable, you’re about as pleasant as stinging nettles.”

The words could’ve been said with ire, but there was a playfulness to his tone. A flurry of butterflies took flight in my stomach like they were caught in a whirlwind. My fingers tightened into a fist, digging my nails in as I told myself this was a job. I needed to remain professional.

I shrugged. “I’ve been called worse.” I tucked my phone away and rose, stepping over my carry-on bag to turn to him completely. We were flying back from Vancouver to LA today so he would be on time for the mandatory set meeting the cast and crew needed to attend tomorrow. “To what do I owe this pleasure? Coming from first class to be in my presence, I’m flattered.”

Abel held out a stack of magazines and shook them in my face. “Someone’s not doing their job,” he said rather joyfully.

I took the magazines and flipped through what he wanted me to see. Nothing new, and nothing I didn’t send to them myself. It was better they printed this over printing shit about him losing his job.

I gave him a shrug. “It’s to be expected. You’re making a huge change in your career. Of course, the rags will have something stupid to say about it. Especially considering everything they’ve been publishing about you for the last five years.”

“The stuff they’ve printed in the past was junk.”

“That you’re a pain in the ass on the verge of constantly losing your career?”

He nodded. “Why do you think I didn’t take you seriously when you told me the network was looking to fire me? According to these, they’ve been looking to fire me since I was hired.”

“Yeah, well, this time, the information comes from the inside and not from some stupid tabloid. It would be wise to take it seriously. This is a big network for television, and if you intend to be on television again, you want to stay in their good graces. Whether you like how they play ball or not.” I let my eyes roam his body appreciatively before I lifted them back to his face. “You didn’t come all the way here to rub these in my face, did you?”

I couldn’t help the small smirk on my face. “You’ve been petty before, but this seems absurd. Besides, I’ve seen them.” I pointed to where I walked by the magazine racks on my way to my boarding area.

Someone behind us screamed in excitement, and we both turned quickly, expecting a fan to come running at us. We hadn’t encountered anything so far, but it wasn’t too late with him being this reckless and being in the public area.

With relief, he turned back and grabbed my arm, guiding me back into a seat. Then, he flopped in the seat beside me, pulling the baseball cap on his head further down.

“I was bored in first-class—bunch of business types, all on their phones. Nobody wants to talk.”

“You don’t strike me as somebody who wants to have a conversation with people right before you’re getting on a plane.”

“Generally not, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how sad you must be in economy.”

“You couldn’t stop thinking about me, huh?”

He glowered, but the damage was done. I was on his mind to the point he had to come and see me. And I couldn’t say I didn’t know how that felt ... because frankly, he was all I thought about all day too.

“So ...” Abel held out an envelope to me. “I figured you’d want to join me in first class.”

I stared at him for a minute, wishing he wasn’t wearing sunglasses so I could see his eyes. It was easier to read his expression that way. Without a clue, I had no idea what the hell this meant.

I lifted my eyebrow. “You bought me a ticket to first class?”

Abel shrugged like it was no big deal, shaking the envelope in my face. “Are you going to join? I bet you’ve never flown first-class before.”

He was right, I hadn’t, but I didn’t expect first class for a three-hour flight to be that interesting. Nonetheless, the gesture wasn’t lost on me. And given it was Abel Clarke doing the gesturing, it had to mean something more.

So, I reached out and took the envelope from him. My fingers inadvertently brushed against his. A jolt of electricity shot through me, curling tightly in my belly. No, that wasn’t my belly. The sensation shot right to my core, and I clenched my thighs together.

“Well, thank you.” I forced myself to say, trying not to focus on the desire wetting my panties.

“Come on. Let’s go before the normies recognize me.”

I rolled my eyes at his pretentiousness but rose anyway and grabbed my carry-on, following his lead through the airport to the first-class lounge. I wanted to touch him again, which was an unusual desire. Even with other men I’d liked, nothing like this had ever happened to me. It wasn’t ever this intense or consuming. I needed to know if that jolt before was static electricity or something else.

Static electricity, I told myself. Because wanting Abel Clarke for anything other than the career boost he would give me was dangerous.

I was not a gambler. Sure and steady was my motto.

And one thing was for sure, Abel Clarke was neither of those things. His hand brushed against mine like he was trying to

grab my fingers. Glancing at him out of the corner of my eye, I inhaled sharply.

Fasten your seatbelts; this plane might be going down.

Chapter 4

Abel

YOU CAN TELL this production was haphazard at best. No one wanted to be here. Getting a bottle of water sent to my trailer was like trying to find gold. It did nothing to ease my mood as I flicked through the script, trying to prepare and failing not to be annoyed by the cheesy Christmas-ness of it all.

The only good thing about this situation was Scout, as reluctant as I was to admit that. She was growing on me rapidly, more than I was comfortable to admit. And I couldn't say I was annoyed she insisted we share a hotel room "to ensure I don't ignore another alarm." Already, my mind reeled with ways to get her between the sheets and show her how good I could make her feel.

Glancing at Scout, she ignored me completely, busy texting on her phone and giving me the chance to let my eyes linger. Today, she's wearing a bright red knit sweater with frills on the shoulders, and a pair of gold and jeweled wreaths hung from her ears like being festive for me to sell this bound-to-be-shit-show movie. It wouldn't, but I liked how the sweater hugged her tight and perky breasts, trailing to her hips wrapped in a plaid pencil skirt. It's LA, so her legs looked bare, but there was a soft sheen of tights.

Is she wearing a garter belt? That would be sexy as fuck.

My sexy little shadow—making sure I did and said all the right things—was proving to be more interesting and distracting with each passing minute.

“Alright. Are you ready?” She pocketed her phone and turned to face me. Her eyes scanned my body.

Does she find me as attractive as I do her? No, this was more than that. I found a lot of women attractive, and I’m sure she found a lot of men attractive too, but when I wasn’t with her, I had this strange driving need to find her and be next to her. That was different than just attraction.

“You know I am capable of being on time.”

“Well, your track record says otherwise.” She stood and walked over to me.

“I’m a changed man, thanks to you.” She gave me a look, clearly calling my bullshit.

“It’s been two days of you being a pain in my ass. That alone tells me you haven’t changed a lick.”

A lick? I’d give her one if she wanted to sit back on the table and lay herself out like the snack she was.

“Maybe I woke on the right side of the bed today.”

“You got out the left. I saw you, remember?” She reached out and straightened the lapel of my suit jacket. I was dressed like a monkey to impress. She insisted on it, so the directors knew I wasn’t anything like the reports said I was.

“How could I forget those cute little koala shortie shorts you were wearing.”

Her eyes flicked to meet mine as she finished smoothing me out. Her fingernails brushed my skin, sending a shiver through my body, and my cock hardened immediately, thinking about how incredible those nails would feel running down my back as she cried out my name, sweat-slicked and gasping. I stifled a soft groan.

My eyes tracked the soft motion of her lips, and that thought was back—the one about how soft she looked and whether her softness would feel as good against my body as I imagined it would.

My mind homed in on it. I had a one-track mind, and without warning, reached out and cupped the back of her head, pulling

her mouth to mine.

She gasped in surprise, although her lips instinctively moved to match mine. My tongue trailed along her bottom lip, turning the heat in my belly to a full inferno. It was taking everything in me right now not to lift and toss her onto the couch so I could claim and show her the real Abel Clarke.

My free hand grasped her waist, pulling her tightly against my body, so there was no hiding my erection as it dug into her softness longingly. My fingernails bit into her skin, the only thing keeping me in control as I nipped her bottom lip wantonly.

She folded against me, releasing a soft sigh, and it was all the opening I needed as my tongue swept out to collect her taste. God, she was divine.

Who needed drugs when I could have Girl Scout's cookies? Give me more.

Her tongue brushed tentatively against mine like she, too, needed to taste every piece of me. Then, just as quickly as the kiss began, it ended, and she pulled away, wiping her lips. But her fingers hovered over them, either soothing the swell or in embarrassment.

She avoided my gaze, keeping her eyes lowered for a long moment, hiding from me. True embarrassment? No, she kissed me back. There's no way she could deny that.

"Abel, we can't," she said firmly. Her eyes finally flicked to look at me. "You're technically my boss. So, this qualifies as sexual harassment. I can file with the agency." With every word, her firmness loosened. She was trying to convince herself. I arched an eyebrow. "Try not to look too smug." She scowled, but the expression did nothing to dissuade me.

Fuck, she was adorable.

I called her bluff. "Well, will you?" I questioned.

Her eyes flashed at the dare, and she stepped back, putting distance between us. "Don't make me," is all she said.

I shook my head. “I didn’t make you do anything.” I stepped closer, crowding her space as I pinned a hand on the wall next to her face and leaned in close. Her eyes widened, but there was no fear in them. Her chest rose heavily as she fought to keep her expression neutral. But desire pooled in her eyes, flashing like fire in the pan. She was fighting what she was feeling with every instinct she had. Why? “Maybe that’s what’s bothering you so much. I kissed you, and your body responded because you wanted it. And you know, if we told them it was consensual, there’s nothing they would do about it. Your excuses are smoke and mirrors, Scout. And I see through the illusion.”

“It’s—” she began, licking her lip desperately.

A predatory smile crossed my face. She was the gazelle, and I was the lion. I’d always enjoyed a good hunt, and this would be so fucking satisfying. “Don’t waste your breath. We both know the truth.” I felt it. She wanted me too. She just wasn’t ready yet. I’d convince her.

“Mr. Clarke, we’re ready to begin.” An assistant interrupted our moment, and Scout stepped under my arm to free herself.

“Great,” I flashed the assistant my most charming smile. “You ready for what comes next, Girl Scout?”

The innuendo hung between us while the oblivious assistant still stood there. She blushed.

Next time I made her blush, I intended to see it all over her naked body.

Chapter 5

Scout

SEXUAL HARASSMENT. I was such a bitch. I couldn't believe I'd said that to him. I was flustered and alarmed by how much I enjoyed his lips against mine—bewildered by how I reacted to him physically. My nipples had *ached* with the need to feel his mouth on them. Never had I longed to know what a man's lips would feel like there until it happened. But then all I could think about was if his mouth felt that good on mine, where else would it feel good? And I had a few suggestions to try out.

So, I reacted impulsively, saying what would be the best thing to push him away. But now and every moment since I reacted, I regretted the words that came out of my mouth. I spent the entire meeting staring at him, trying to figure out how he perceived what I had said.

Was he mad? Was he turned off? Did he still want me? God, I hated I was even thinking that. And yet, my lips burned, wanting his against them again. I kept touching them because the ghost of his lips on mine haunted me. I would need an exorcist to get Abel Clarke out from under my skin now.

The ride back to the hotel was hellish as I tried to cope with the fact I had stupidly signed us up to stay in a suite together. At first, the plan was simple: keep an eye on him. Until I realized his gaze was on me, and I'd parked myself right in the lion's den.

Now that we had kissed, all I could think about was him in the other room, sleeping in nothing but those boxer briefs that hid nothing from the imagination. I stifled a groan as the elevator ascended. The soft sound ricocheted around us, and I took a

chance glancing over at him. He was already watching me, a smirk on his face like he could read my mind.

Damnit, he'd heard that. I shifted and glanced at the numbers, two more floors, and then we'd reach ours.

"So," he said, breaking the palpable tension.

"Now that you've heard the director's vision of the movie, how are you feeling?" I didn't allow him to ask what was obviously on his mind. I could read his face like an open book, and I wasn't going to give him the opening he craved.

He shrugged. "Still a cheesy Christmas movie no matter how the director envisions it."

The doors pinged open, and he stepped out, turning back and holding out his hand for me like he was trying to be some kind of chivalrous gentleman.

"Don't act like you have one charming bone in your body," I said dismissively, walking past him and down the hall to our room. My fingers were shaking as I dug through my purse, looking for my room key, desperate to get inside the suite so I could get into my bedroom and close the door between us. There, I had a lock, and distance was exactly what the doctor ordered to get over whatever was causing my body to react to him.

Except it took me too long to get the room key out, and his hand slammed on the door beside my face. I started, not needing to turn around to know how close he was standing to me. He wasn't quite pushed against me but so close that if I tried to back away, our bodies would fold together.

"Can I help you?" It took everything in me to keep the quiver out of my voice. I was practically simpering as he did that alpha male thing again, and trust me, I smelled the pheromones. They were working ... too well.

"I don't have a charming bone in my body," he whispered hotly against the curve of my ear. A shiver akin to a lightning bolt shot right through me, and like a storm, the wetness followed, pooling in my panties. My eyes rolled back slightly

as they fluttered closed. “But I do have a bone you’ll find charming.”

I almost laughed at the cheesy line until he dug his cock right into the softness of my ass, and the sound died, quickly replaced by a much louder moan this time.

God fucking damnit.

He smirked against my neck. “Is this sexual harassment, Scout?” He pressed harder, the space between us disappearing as I became one with him and the fucking door. “Are you going to report me?”

Just as fast as he sandwiched me, he disappeared, and if not for the door, I’d be in a puddle on the ground. The only thing I needed to report was robbery with a deadly weapon because my sense of reason was gone, thanks to that 254mm in his jeans.

I was still trying to compose myself and restart my brain when he was back, but not with his whole body. His hand dove under my skirt, seizing the opportunity the slit at the back afforded him. His hand cupped my pussy, his fingertips stroking what was left of my panties between my legs as he growled.

“Fucking hell, you’re wet, Girl Scout.”

“Ab-Abel.” I managed to mutter, unable to stop the quiver this time.

“Tell me to stop. I’ll stop.” His fingers eased the fabric to the side, finding my clit, which might as well have been a big red button for him.

“Don’t!” It was my turn to brace against the door as my forehead fell forward, my eyes closing as my hips rolled against his hand.

“Not until you’ve come all over my hand and can barely stand,” he promised, biting my ear lobe suddenly. “And only then do I plan to pick you up and take you into that hotel room so I can stuff you so full, you’ll be ruined for anyone else.”

I whimpered again, unable to form words as he shifted me slightly to allow his other arm to wrap around my front. He quickly tugged the skirt enough to slide his hand underneath, replacing his fingers on my clit. The fingers of his other hand circled my entrance slowly, and the need for him to fuck me burned straight to my core.

He wasn't bothered that we were still in the hallway. Anyone could come out of their room and see us, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him to stop long enough to get inside. In fact ... I'd dropped my purse.

His fingers sunk into my core, and my train of thought abruptly stalled as I moaned. "Oh, you're such a good girl, Scout. Shall we earn a life skills badge? Come for me, Girl Scout." His fingertip circled my clit before quickly flicking it and returning to the circular motion. The difference between the two actions was overwhelming, sending me higher and higher. The fingers that sunk into me squelched with every thrust.

"God, I love that sound. Can you hear how wet you are for me? You love this, don't you?" His hotly whispered words only added to the building overwhelm, my system officially short-circuiting. "I can't wait to taste you, Scout. Do you think you're a thin mint or a caramel delight?"

His fingers disappeared suddenly, making me whimper. I was so close, and his fingers on my clit weren't enough.

"Mmm ..." He groaned. "Lemonade. My favorite."

"Abel, please ..."

"Please, what, Girl Scout?" The hand he'd licked cupped my chin and turned my head to face him.

"Stop torturing me," I whispered.

A smirk stretched his face. His lips collided with mine, all tongue and teeth as he ravaged my mouth like he had my pussy. He swallowed each moan I offered him like he was taking them as shots.

Then, his fingers found that hot spot again, suddenly stuffing three ... no, four ... into me.

“Fuck!” The stretch was too much and not enough. I needed him deeper. I needed his cock. But before I could ask for it, he pinched my clit, and the world exploded.

He whispered praise in my ear, but I could barely hear it. I was in the center of the blast, and all my senses ceased functioning. Riding his hands like a saddle, I came until I couldn't anymore and slumped into him. He held me there, the only thing keeping me upright as everything slowly came back to me.

“That’s my good Girl Scout. I think that was worth a gold award, don’t you?”

With the return of my senses came the return of my sense in general, and I dropped to a crouch to retrieve my purse. Half my stuff had spilled out, revealing the lost key card, and I snatched it, rising to fluidly swipe it before pushing the door open.

One step in, I twisted around to face him. “You’re filming scenes fourteen through twenty tomorrow. Make sure you’re ready with your lines. I’ll quiz you over breakfast.”

Then I hurried to my room because if I didn’t put space between us, getting finger fucked in the hallway wasn’t the only reckless thing I would do.

And I most certainly couldn’t afford to fall in love with Abel Clarke.

Chapter 6

Abel

A SNOWBALL HIT me in the face, and Luca ended the shoot. “We don’t have a problem, do we, Abel?”

I blinked, tearing my eyes away from Scout, who had been busy scrawling notes in my script for me. At the sound of my name, she looked up quickly. A blush stained her cheeks as she attempted to scowl disapprovingly at me.

If it would get her to talk to me again, I’d be disappointing all she wanted ... except in bed. Which I was still determined to get her into. She could lock her room all she wanted, but she had to get there first.

“No, sorry. But this is why I became an actor instead of a baseball player when the Angels called.” This earned me a couple of chuckles from the crew before the director nodded.

“Sure, let’s take five and let Abel rest his major league arm. Reset the scene, please.” I tried to smile gratefully, then thanked my co-star, Laura, before politely excusing myself, and like a meteor hurling to its death in Earth’s atmosphere, I made my way over to Scout.

“It’s day two, Abel. Seriously?”

“What? I’m playing nice, and I was early this morning for hair and makeup!” I pulled the beanie off my head, shaking out my curly black hair. Her eyes followed as I swept my fingers through it, pushing it off my face.

“They had to stop filming for you.”

“I was distracted by you.”

This took the wind out of her sails as she stared at me, that blush blossoming again. She opened her mouth, then closed it again like she was auditioning to be my pet fish. I lifted an eyebrow, waiting for her to find whatever words she was looking for.

“Don’t be,” she finally managed.

“Kinda hard not to be when you’re gorgeous.”

Her eyes flicked to Laura and back to me. “Really? You’re working with Laura Groves.”

I glanced over at my beautiful co-star before looking back at her. “Sure, but she’s not my type.”

She arched an eyebrow. “We’re both blondes. We both have green eyes. She’s ...”

She paused, and I took the opportunity to clarify. “You. You’re my type, Scout.”

She inhaled sharply and dropped her voice. “No.”

“I know that ... experience ... wasn’t awful, so why are you still resisting this?” I frowned as she looked away, watching everyone else but me. All my life, people stared at me, but I’d never longed for them to do it the way I wanted her to.

“A lot is riding on you and me working out professionally, Abel.” She finally looked back at me. “Someone my age doesn’t make it in this industry overnight as you did. It can take years to get somewhere. But succeeding with you, proving myself to the agency, will show them I’m ready for the big time. There’s a portfolio of stars with my name on it back at the office if I don’t fuck up with you. So, fucking you is off the table.”

“It wasn’t last night.”

“Last night was a lapse of judgment on my part, and I’m sorry for leading you on.” She held out the script, nudging my stomach with it. “Practice your lines before they start rolling again.”

I reached out, wrapping my hand around her wrist. “No, it wasn’t. You feel it too, Scout. I heard you with your friend. I

see it in your eyes when you think I'm not watching. I'm a fuck up, maybe, but I won't fuck up your life." I stepped closer, uncaring if anyone was watching us. As far as I was concerned, it was just her and I on set. The rest of the world didn't exist. "I want you, Scout. Like I've never wanted anyone before, and I don't mean getting you in my bed."

She weakly tried to pull herself away, but we both knew it was a half-assed attempt—a final show to pretend she didn't want this.

"I'm going to finish this scene, and then you're going to meet me in my dressing room." My gaze burned into hers, willing her to let go of this silly stubbornness.

"Okay, everyone, on your marks!"

"Get going, Girl Scout. I'll see you soon."

I let go of her and turned away, heading back to my spot. Once I was in position, I looked back over at her, she was still frozen, and indecision was evident on her face. But the director called the set to order, and I focused myself.

One take, and then I was going to have her.

[***]

Easing the door open, my entire body was tense with preparation for disappointment. Finding the room empty would be my worst nightmare, but as I opened it, my eyes drank in the sight of her leaning against the counter in nothing but lacy underthings.

A garter belt, fuck yes. I drank her in, absorbing the reflection behind her, showing me the back where a little red bow sat at the crest of her ass. If this was an early Christmas present, thank you, Santa.

She uncrossed her legs and straightened as I closed the door behind me. "Did you wear that on purpose today?"

"I always wear something nice," she said with a shrug.

"Do you? Because this looks like you picked it out for me personally." I stepped closer, unzipping the stupid winter jacket they had on me for the scene and dropping it on the

floor. Next, I pulled my t-shirt over my head, taking the beanie with it as it joined the coat in a pile.

“Maybe I thought about what your face would look like if you saw it when I put it on.”

“Did reality match imagination?” Her gaze was distracted by my chest, running her eyes along the hair curling over my muscles. I had to wax for the show, but I hadn’t done a shirtless scene in a couple of months, which allowed it to grow out.

Her eyes flicked back to my face as she swallowed hard. “Better.” She managed as I brought my hand to my jeans, undoing the button and pushing them over my hips.

“Yeah?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Everything about you is better than I imagined.” My eyes discernably turned to my cock as I palmed it through the boxer briefs. I let out a low chuckle before pushing it down to let her take it in.

The only sound that came next was her soft intake of breath as I stroked myself a couple of times. I didn’t need the help. All I’d been thinking about while throwing snowballs was burying mine in her. I was ready to go.

“I’m scared, Abel.”

“I’m big, but it’ll fit. I promise.”

“Not of your dick, you ass.” She laughed as our eyes met again, and I chuckled. “I’m scared of how I feel about you. You’re unpredictable at best and unreliable at worst, Abel. You have the power to destroy my career, my body”—her eyes flicked to my cock again—“and my heart.” They rose to meet mine once more. “So, what does that leave me with?”

“Girl Scout,” I sighed, stepping right next to her. “You’re not the one in danger of being ruined. I’d give up everything to kiss you again. You only have to say the words. You have the power here, don’t think for one second that you don’t.”

She swallowed, drawing my eyes to how her throat moved, and I reached out, cupping it as I brushed my thumb down the

center of the column. “I get it now—that willingness to lay yourself on a grenade for someone. I’d do it for you in a heartbeat if it meant giving you everything you want and more. I hope I’m included in whatever you desire because going back to life before you is impossible. There is no before you, only with you.”

Chapter 7

Scout

GODDAMIT, I'm in love with Abel Clarke. And maybe he didn't just want to get me into his bed but damn if I didn't want him in mine.

My mouth collided with his as my hands gripped his waist, pulling him against me. The bristles of his chest hairs rubbed against my peaked nipples, and I moaned. Fabric ripping echoed around us as he pulled the panties I wore tight, bunching the fabric between my folds, and as he tugged, they rubbed against my helpless, throbbing clit.

"Fuck," I gasped and pulled back. "I can take them off, you know!"

"You put a bow on. I want to rip the present open. And I want you to keep those thigh-highs on." His eyes flashed as he smirked.

With another yank, the fabric gave away as the painful sting eased. His fingers rubbed, soothing my assaulted skin.

"I'm clean, it's been a few months since my last partner, but I'll wear a condom if you want me to."

I shook my head. "IUD," was all I muttered as I kissed him again and released my hold on his waist to finally get my hands on that glorious cock. He groaned, bowing his head into my shoulder as I stroked him a couple of times, one hand cupping his balls as I rolled them around in my palm.

"Enough. Turn around, Girl Scout."

"Not yet. It's my turn to play."

He grabbed my wrists again and pulled my hands away. “We don’t have much time before I have to be back on set, and I’m not wasting this opportunity. Do as your told.”

The command bristled through me; if possible, my nipples got harder as I clenched my thighs together. “Fine,” I said, trying to sound conceding, but I liked this. I liked when he took control.

“Hands on the counter where I can see them.” I laid them flat and leaned into them as he moved behind me in the reflection. His hand stroked my spine slowly before his thumb drew the line, sending shivers to my pussy.

Then, he grabbed my cheeks and pulled them apart as his cock nudged between them and stroked along me. It was so gentle compared to his touch, and the anticipation left me panting. His gaze held mine in the mirror as he rocked against me again, missing the spot where I wanted him once more. I rocked back, trying to help him hit his target, but he only chuckled, bringing one hand to the back of my neck.

“Don’t worry, Girl Scout, you’ll get your reward, I promise.” He slicked along me once more and then, without warning, sunk himself to the hilt. He was right, it fit, but I was so full. And another moan escaped me as his fingers on my neck stroked gently. “Such a good girl, taking my cock so well.”

I would’ve never pegged myself as one with a praise kink, but every time he gave me approval, it made me want to do anything to earn it again. He removed himself slowly until just the head stretched me, and then he thrust back in, hard and desperate.

“Yes, Abel!” My fingers curled against the cold counter, desperately stretching as I bucked back against him.

His eyes were ablaze as he watched us in the mirror, my tits bouncing against the lacy cups as he rocked harder and faster into me, careful never to pull out fully.

“I want to watch you fuck me,” I whispered the words and swallowed hard after licking my lips. “I want to see how I take you like a good girl.”

“Yeah?” He smirked at me. “You want to see how pretty your little pink pussy looks wrapped around my cock?”

My head bobbed before I finished processing his question and his smirk only grew as the hand on my ass slid to my thigh. He grabbed it and turned us, putting me on the counter so I had something to rest on before twisting me until I was on display. I looked over my shoulder at the reflection, my eyes glued onto the sight of his cock stretching me.

“Fuck,” I gasped as he pulled back to show me how his cock glistened with my juices before sliding back inside me.

My hand clung to the edge to keep myself upright as he sunk back in, my swollen lips clinging to his cock like he was supposed to be a part of me. And he was. I felt it deep into my soul.

From this position, it was easier to reach between my legs and touch my clit, needy for attention. His eyes tracked my movements and the hand on my neck tightened.

“You don’t come until I tell you, Girl Scout.”

“Yes,” I promised breathlessly.

His fingers flexed slightly before his hips resumed their pace. The harder he went, the more my body pressed forward until my cheek rested on the counter, leaving me half-hanging while he fucked me.

I was fascinated by the sight of our joining, never having had the chance to watch like this before. My lips swelled around him, turning red as blood rushed to my center, and the veins of his cock pulsed with every thrust. He struggled to hold onto his control, his balls tight against his body.

“I’m close, Abel ... I want you to fill me.” I tore my eyes away from our fucking to meet his.

He released my neck, smoothing his hand down the back of my head. “I will, and then you’ll walk around for the rest of the day with my cum dripping down your thighs, unable to stop thinking about how good we look together.” He drove as deep as he could, grinding his hips in figure-eight motions.

I moaned and dragged the arm on the counter behind me, grabbing onto him. “Yes, I want you to be running lines and thinking about how good my pussy ringed your cock.”

“Maybe I’ll put a diamond here.” He pulled out completely and suddenly stroked forward, driving the head against my clit and nudging my fingers away. Was he trying to point to my clit or my finger? My heart stuttered at the idea of both.

Then he re-entered me, and my thoughts flew out once more. “Don’t stop ... please.”

He grunted, thrusting harder as he picked up the pace again. “Let go, Girl Scout. It’s time to come.”

With every drill, he pushed me harder against the cold counter, rubbing everywhere. Holding each other’s gaze with an intensity I’d never known, it only took a few more drives before my walls clenched.

Then he impaled me on him one last time, holding us together. “That’s a good girl.”

I came with a cry, turning my face into the counter as waves of pleasure washed over me. He pulsed inside me, spilling out like promised, and a rough tug on my hair forced my eyes open again.

“Watch,” he commanded as he pulled out, cum still dripping from his cock.

My eyes dropped to my core, still pulsing with shocks of pleasure, pushing out thick beads of cum trailing down my lips to my legs.

His fingers swiped along it, pushing it back into my hole as he curled and rubbed against my sensitive insides. “I don’t want it to come out now; that’s no fun.” He smirked at me before twisting his fingers around for one last burst of rapture before he pulled them free and offered them to me.

Like the greedy girl I was, I lapped at the offering only to hear his praise one last time. And he gave it to me as my tongue swirled around the digits when he pulled them out with a pop.

“I’m so proud of you, my perfect Girl Scout.”

Chapter 8

Abel

“ANARCHIST ABEL IS ACTUALLY AN ANGEL.” I scoffed and scrolled past the article to the next one. *“Anarchist Abel Amends Atrocious Attitude.”* My eyes practically rolled into the back of my head. I wasn’t that bad.

I stopped on another article with a video attached to it. Hitting play, I watched from a crew member’s point of view as I shouted at the lighting director on the set of the show. I winced at my words, quickly closing the browser and reflecting for a moment. Maybe I had been a bit of a prick since fame went to my head.

I’d never considered the possibility until Scout pointed it out. Others had called me out on my bullshit, but something about her went past all my defenses—especially the ones around my heart.

I saw now what the others did and was embarrassed by myself. That guy, the one who threw drinks and swore at hapless set workers, who showed up late and disrespected his crew and co-workers ... wasn’t me anymore. I didn’t want to be him. “Anarchist Abel.”

Not that Angel Abel fit either, but who I was, who everyone perceived me to be, didn’t deserve Scout. She deserved a man who built her up and was proud to be next to her. I wanted to be that for her in every way possible.

Audrey fluffed my hair one more time with her fingers before smiling in the mirror at me. “There.”

Honestly, she'd been at it for an hour trying to tame my curls, but it didn't look any different from how I showed up this morning. Maybe it was because hair and make-up weren't something I would normally care about, but she'd worked hard.

I should compliment her.

"Is this what freshly fucked is supposed to look like?" I offered a smile.

"According to Luca." She scowled slightly, and I lifted an eyebrow but didn't say anything. Not my place. And if the director was banging the hair and make-up girl, that was even more not my place.

I almost made a comment about checking the next time I get laid but realized that might be inappropriate. See? Already a changed man, I thought before I spoke.

"Well, thanks for your hard work, Audrey. I appreciate it." She smiled gratefully, and for a second, I felt good knowing I'd made her happy.

As I started to rise, I paused, holding the arms of the chair. "Hey, do you know a good restaurant for dates around here? Somewhere impressive?"

"Madeo in Beverly Hills is popular."

I sat back and looked at my phone, Googling the spot. She was right. It looked pretty impressive. Not that eating out was my thing. I had a long-standing relationship with room service, but that, I was sure, wasn't impressive at all. Copying the contact info, I paused. Normally, I would've sent the details to my PA to book a table. Except this time, I was taking my PA.

"You been there?" I looked at her. "Would she like it?"

"If she likes you, I'm sure she'd love just about anywhere."

I smile gratefully before rising from my chair to head back to set. One more scene today and one more tomorrow before we wrapped. If I was going to convince Scout we could make this work, I had to do it before she flew back to Chicago for Christmas with her family.

As I crossed the lot, a set dresser swayed on a ladder while she tried to adjust some baubles on a Christmas tree. Grabbing the bottom, I steadied her but missed her thanks as my eyes homed in on Scout.

She was pacing in front of the studio lot doors, her phone pressed to her ear, looking upset about something. Her free hand swung around as she talked with it. It was an adorable quirk that, despite her irritation, made me smile.

“You good?” I glanced at the dresser, who nodded, and I released my hold. As I began to make my way over to her, snippets of her conversation drifted toward me.

“Yeah, but I’ve been dealing with him for weeks. Every mess you’ve thrown my way, I cleaned it up. I’ve been working non-stop. I agreed to work over Christmas, pushing my flight home to the twenty-fourth at eleven-thirty at night!” She pulled the phone away and growled in annoyance, turning away from me.

As she put it back to her ear, the tension rose along her back as her hand dropped back to her side and folded into a fist. “So that’s it, I’m stuck? You let him use me, and then, when he’s done, I’m left with nothing, just like he’s done to everyone else. He’s never going to change if you don’t get rid of him.”

My heart sank, another unfamiliar sensation. It was a ruse by my agent then. He sent her to clean up my act, and what? Get in my bed so she had me by the cock and could control me? Christ, that was the most fucked up thing I’d ever heard.

Shaking my head, I turned and walked away from her—the last piece of her conversation following me. “I never liked him! I was putting up with him because you made me a promise, and now he’s going to get all the credit for what I did!”

Oh, trust me, Girl Scout. There won’t be any credit handed out when I’m done.

I pushed the lot door open and stepped inside, snapping my fingers at the nearest set PA. “Get me a vodka, neat. I want it in a water bottle, and if you keep your mouth shut about it,

I've got a Christmas bonus that will keep all the lights on your tree." I pulled out my wallet and lifted a couple of hundred bills, holding it out to him. "First installment."

The PA stood there, gaping at me for a moment before he nodded. "Sure thing, Mr. Clarke." He took the cash, tucking it away before he ran off to get my drink.

Two more scenes ... Two more scenes, and then I could get the fuck out of here and drink until Scout was just a verb to describe what I planned to do to find a new agency.

Fuck them. Fuck her. Fuck this fucking Christmas movie.

Chapter 9

Scout

ABEL DIDN'T COME BACK to the hotel last night, and every time I tried to call him, it went straight to voicemail. I wasn't sure what was going on, but considering I was now fired and my name had been taken off the approved crew list for the movie set, I couldn't even get onto the lot to see him. After sixteen hours of sitting in the hotel room, I finally accepted he wasn't coming back.

Leave it to me to fall for some arrogant movie star who only wanted to get in my pants. Like the fool I was, I'd walked right into that dressing room with a bow on top, giving it to him. It didn't matter that it was the best sex of my life. Obviously, it didn't mean shit to him if he couldn't even be bothered to call or text me that he was changing hotels.

Nope.

Instead, like every other asshole in LA, he ghosted me. I couldn't even hold the job thing over him anymore since his fucking agent had taken all the credit for my hard work. As far as they were concerned, Abel was back on the straight and narrow, thanks to that prick, Darren. Who'd let me know my services were no longer needed via text message because he didn't even have the balls to say it to my face.

Not that I'm surprised. He struck me as a weaselly kind of turd.

First, I was too angry to do or say anything. I tried texting him, but my messages came back undeliverable. He wasn't

answering my calls, and I couldn't get to his voicemail which all left me guessing he had blocked my number.

I considered leaving a note in the hotel room for about half a second, but he was avoiding me, so he would likely send somebody to collect his things and never bother coming back. An assistant wasn't going to notice a note on the bedside table, or at least if they did, they'd assume it was from somebody he didn't want to see again.

That's what I'd do.

So, with three days left until Christmas, I called the airline and moved my ticket. It cost me way more than I should've spent, but frankly, I didn't want to stay in LA a minute longer. I wanted to get home, see my family, hang out with Naya and forget about Abel Clarke, which was a pretty tall order.

I slowed my speed walk to stare at the nine-foot cologne ad with his gigantic head staring at me. His eyes moved, always watching me no matter which way went.

"You want me to leave? I'm leaving!" I shouted at it like a crazy person. "So, why are you haunting me? The Vatican's in Chicago, trying to do some exorcism. Maybe I'll have to contact them to get you out of me!"

A woman grabbed a little girl's arm and gave me a wide berth, glancing back every so often to ensure I wasn't following them.

"Fucking Abel Clarke, am I right?" I muttered under my breath, readjusting my grip on my rolling suitcase before resuming my way to departures.

Dropping myself into the first seat I found, I pulled up my phone. Like an addict, I obsessively checked our message string, disappointing myself when there was still nothing new. There was, however, an email from the agency thanking me again for my services, with a second email from the owner introducing Darren as the next senior partner.

"Twat waffle," I cursed, crushing the power button with my thumb before leaning back in my seat with a slow groan.

I was excited when I started my talent management and acquisitions degree. I loved the film industry but didn't have a creative bone in my body. I was a people person, and after the career counselor urged me out of my film major and into talent management, it was like a lightbulb going off inside me.

I finally found the thing that excited me to get out of bed. And for the first time in the two years I've been doing this, this morning was the first time I'd woken up wondering if maybe I should go home and find a career back in Chicago.

“Attention passengers of flight 742 to Chicago. Your flight is currently delayed due to a snowstorm over the Midwest. For more information, please see a flight attendant.”

I groaned again, lifting my head only to drop it on the edge of the seat, hammering the back of my head in annoyance.

“It's Christmas. I'm supposed to receive Christmas miracles, not getting shit on everywhere I turn. I was a good girl this year, Santa. Why are you giving me a huge sack full of—”

My phone rang with FaceTime, and I lifted it. Naya was calling. I hadn't told her yet that I was heading home early, maybe because I subconsciously knew there was a chance the stupid flight would be delayed. It was winter, after all.

Hitting answer, her huge rainbow-framed glasses appeared on the screen. “Holy shit, what is happening over there?” She pulled back, pressing a finger to the arch of her frames, shoving them back up her nose.

“What are you talking about?”

“It's all over the news. Abel's gone Bad Santa ... or Sad Santa ... or something.”

I lifted an eyebrow and opened my mouth before promptly closing it. “Not my circus, not my monkeys.”

Naya popped a bubble of gum. “Sorry, not your circus? What the hell is going on?”

“I got fired. Apparently, I did such a good job that they are allowing me to have a longer Christmas break to reward me.

Which feels less like a reward and more like a punishment now I'm sitting at the airport waiting on a delayed flight.”

“You're coming home?” Naya looked excited before her face fell again. “Okay, I'm being selfish because I want to see you, but that sucks. I'm so sorry. I know how hard you worked to prove yourself.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It was a long shot anyway. Harper only got the position in the first place because of who her mom was. Everybody knew it. I'm a nobody, and even with Harper's endorsement, it wasn't enough. They didn't care.” My eyes welled up with tears.

“Wow, babe. Come on. It's just a setback. You'll have plenty of opportunities to show those sharks whose ocean it is.”

I shook my head. “It's not that.” Tears welled in my eyes as I let out a soft sob. “Despite my best efforts, I fell in love with Abel. From the first moment I saw him, I tried to deny it, but then we kissed. Then it became something more, and now he's branded on my skin. The only way I can get him off is to peel all the layers back and leave them behind. Which would mean leaving LA behind because he's everywhere.”

“Well, apparently, whatever conversation you two had before you left, he's not taking it so well. They're saying he trashed his trailer, showed up drunk, and got into a fight with the director. Everybody's talking about it. That's why I called you because it didn't seem like that was something that could happen if you were on the scene.”

I frowned, considering what she was saying. “Abel and I never talked. He doesn't even know I got fired unless he was the one who suggested it. He didn't come back from filming, and he's blocked my number—”

“—I can unlock it for you,” Naya grinned. “I still have access to his phone, and let me tell you, he's Ubered a lot of alcohol to his location. He's either holding a party, or he's going to set himself on fire because there's no reason for one man to have that much alcohol.”

“I think you might be onto something with the setting himself on fire thing if what you’re saying is true. Filming was going great. He only had one more scene, so I have no idea why he’d fuck it up now.”

Naya bobbed her head, not answering me for a minute, and then she looked up. “Alright, you’re unblocked, and I’ve set you to unknown caller, so he’ll either ignore that, or he’ll answer it and have no idea it’s you. But I suggest if you feel the way you say you do about him, fleeing to Chicago is the last choice you want to make.”

Chapter 10

Abel

I SUCCESSFULLY MANAGED to get everybody to leave me the fuck alone as I sat on the stage set for the Mall Santa scene. They'd moved on to another scene with a threat about how I had to get my shit together. But honestly? I couldn't be bothered.

There's no fucking point to any of this, was there? Christmas miracles weren't real. That hope floats, lovey-dovey, shoot for the stars love was all bullshit in the end. This world was like I'd always thought it was—full of predators and prey. And the predators clawed their way to the top, taking down whoever they needed to while the prey fell into a heap.

I was a predator until I'd let Scout turn me into the prey, which was the last time I would ever let somebody do that to me. Lifting the vodka bottle to my lips, I tilted my head back, chugging several mouthfuls.

The PA had done what I asked, but he thought I wouldn't realize he'd watered it down. Setting the bottle on the arm of Santa's throne, I pulled out my phone and opened a delivery app, ordering more booze to my hotel room—my new hotel room because I sure as hell wasn't going back to the one I was sharing with Scout.

Once the order was processed, I stuck my phone back in my pocket and rose, swiping the bottle again and taking another long gulp. Stumbling through the set, there was something eerie about all the Christmas-ness. Amidst the dimmed lights, distant voices echoed while they finished the film's last scenes.

If we didn't re-shoot this mall scene today, I was pretty confident it would get cut from the film. But what did I fucking care? It's all a joke.

I tossed the bottle into the nearby garbage can and cut across the next set, where I tripped over a camera track and landed face-first on the ground, out cold.

[***]

The whole set was dark when I came to, and no voices drifted to me. My head was pounding, though, as I rolled onto my back with a groan, checking my face and forehead for any damage.

I was still wearing the damn Santa beard. Peeling the fake hair away from my skin, I winced and ripped like a Band-Aid. Rubbing my jaw, I continued checking for any damage before taking off the mustache.

When I was confident nothing was broken, I sat slowly and tried to figure out what time it was. It was late. I'd never seen a set as quiet as this. Rising to my feet, the room swung around me, and I reached for something to brace myself. Besides the camera track I'd tripped over, there was nothing, which left me floating in mid-air, trying to steady myself.

"Fuck. Maybe he didn't water down the vodka." I winced as another forceful throb attacked my head, and I stumbled back the way I'd come to the throne I could collapse into until my head functioned properly.

I tripped over something else, catching myself this time but making a ton of racket didn't help the pounding in my skull. Only then did the thought register to use my phone's flashlight as I dug it out, checked the time and confirmed it was well-past shooting time, and punched the light on.

Better. Although the LED lights were a pain in the noggin. I stumbled through to the next set and spotted my goal. Glinting gold with red and green, I made my uneasy way over to Santa's spot and collapsed into it.

The soft rap of footsteps forced my eyes open again as a beam of light flashed across my face.

“Whoa.”

“Fuck.” I covered my eyes with my arm, squinting from under the shelter to size up the intruder.

“Abel ... Clarke?” The beam of light moved again, this time casting to the side but illuminating my face.

“Hey, man.” I dropped my arm and relaxed back into the chair.

“Uh, you know the set is closed, right?”

“You sure? I thought they were filming a dining in the dark scene.”

The security guard stared at me for a moment before realizing I was being a smart-ass. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Sure, give me a second. I tripped and knocked myself out a few hours ago.”

“Hours? Do you need me to call an ambulance? You could have a concussion.”

I waved my hand at him. “I was drinking—drunk. That probably didn’t help.”

We lapsed into silence for a moment as the guard waited for me to say something else.

When I didn’t, he cleared his throat. “Listen, I was doing one more sweep before locking up. I have somewhere to be.”

“Right.” I grabbed the arms of the chair and rose, swaying slightly as the room turned again. Attempting to take a step, I missed, and if not for the burly beefcake, I would’ve gone down again.

“Easy there.” His arm wrapped around my waist. There was a discernable sniff and a recoil before he cleared his throat. “How much you had to drink?”

“Enough,” I muttered, trying to steady myself before we started to tango.

“Listen, I’m not judging, but aren’t you like a big movie star or something? Why the hell are you drinking on set?”

“Bad day,” I said, pulling myself away completely. Maybe he wasn’t judging, but it felt like judgment, and I didn’t need his help standing up.

“Yeah, okay. We all have those, but that doesn’t mean you go looking for comfort at the bottom of the bottle. It’s Christmas, and I would’ve been the last to say this X days ago, but ... don’t you have someone you want to spend it with?”

Scout’s smile flashed across my mind like a right hook to the gut. “I thought I did, but I was wrong.”

Mr. Security frowned at me before rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I know how that is. But if you’re wrong, or even slightly wrong, this time of year ...” He paused, clearly thinking of something or someone. “Well, a lot can happen and change—some good, some bad—but it’s also a time when the last thing you expected to happen can and will. So, if there is someone you want to be with, and maybe you think they don’t want to be with you, it’s worth letting them know.” He shrugged. “What’s the worst that can happen? You get drunk and knock yourself out past lights-out at work? You’ve already done that.”

A small laugh forced its way out. “Then I meet Mr. Six-foot-something Built-Like-A-Brick-Shithouse.”

“Most people call me Ryder.” He flashed a grin.

“Well, Ryder, I don’t need to tell her I want to be with her. She made it clear she never wanted to be with me, I was just a stepping stool for her career, and she didn’t mind stuffing her heel into me on the way up.”

“She said that?” He looked surprised and then regretful, hopefully over saying anything else to me.

“Not in so many words, but I overheard it.”

“Hang on. You overheard her saying something but didn’t ask her about it to her face? God, you actors are all drama queens.” He shook his head. “Go and speak to her. You know what they say about assuming. Makes an ass out of you and me.”

“You’re seriously calling me an ass right now?”

“Yeah, because you are if this is how belligerent you get over something you don’t know for sure—total asshole move.”

Fuck. He wasn’t wrong. I am an asshole, even after I promised her I wasn’t.

Chapter 11

Scout

“WHY ARE you still at the airport?” I immediately regretted answering the FaceTime from Naya as I shrugged.

“I have no idea where he is, and he hasn’t been picking up. My phone’s been calling until it finally goes to voicemail. But his mailbox is full, so I can’t leave any messages, and when I text, I still don’t hear from him. So now, I figure every time I call, he knows it’s me from the text messages, and he’s still avoiding me.”

Naya rolled her eyes. “Girl, those sound like a bunch of excuses. You should’ve called me way sooner. I can check his location from here.”

“I don’t even know I want you to. If he’s this hell-bent on avoiding me, why the hell do I want to go prancing across LA looking for him? If I’m going to love somebody, I want to love somebody who wants to be with me. Somebody who would cross heaven and earth for me because he doesn’t care about anything except me.”

Naya rolled her eyes. “Why does it always have to be the guy who does that? You’re saying you don’t want to have to chase him, but then you turn around and say you want him to chase you. That’s fucked up logic. You know that, right?” I stuck my tongue out at her. “You’re not the heroine in a romance book. This is real life. And if you want him, you need to ensure he knows that. Guys are dumb. Trust me, I’m surrounded by enough of them. They need—and want—you to spell it out for them. That’s the only way it gets through their thick skulls.”

I let out a long sigh before shrugging. “Fine, I’ll do the chasing thing. Ping his location for me.”

Naya grinned. “It’s already running. Give me two ... more ... seconds ...” she said slowly, concentrating on her screen. “And voila! Wait, that can’t be right.”

“What?” I asked as she leaned closer to the screen, ignoring me as she dabbled on her computer, frowning even more.

“It says he’s at the airport.”

“Are you sure you didn’t ping my phone?”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Yes, that’s what I just double-checked. Your phone is pinging at the airport, and his phone is too. I’ve got both screens up.”

“You hacked my phone?” I asked in disgust.

She shook her head. “Of course not. We have to have some level of trust between us. I do have you on Find My Friends, though.”

“Oh, right.” I grinned. “I forgot you installed that on my phone.”

Naya nodded. “Safety first.” She looked back at the screen. “Yeah, it says he’s at the airport. Let me check his messages and see what he’s booked.” She went quiet again and did her thing. Then, after a few minutes, she looked at me in surprise. “Any reason why Abel Clarke would be flying out to Chicago tonight?”

“None that I know of. From what I know, he’s British. If he’s going home for the holidays, he’s heading back there.”

Naya shook her head. “Nope. According to this, he bought a ticket to Chicago. In fact, I’m pretty sure this is the same flight you’re on—742?”

I sat straight and looked around, an uneasy knot forming in my stomach as my eyes scoured the departure lounge. “He wouldn’t be here with the common folk. He flies first class.”

“Maybe, but a last-minute ticket for first class is not always feasible.”

I didn't so much spot him as heard everyone's alarm when a movie star walked casually through the lounge without security. His head was on a swivel as he looked back and forth across the rows of seats.

Then, our eyes met.

He crossed to me, past the waves of people standing around with their cameras pointed right at us. If he was about to make another scene, they'd be cashing in the checks.

He stopped in front of me and opened his mouth, fire in his eyes. I lifted an eyebrow, raising my hand and putting it right over his mouth like always. He twisted his head away with a sharp yank and glared at me more.

Seriously? *He* was mad at *me*?

I laughed, unable to stop myself. That didn't help his mood.

"Really? This is fucking funny to you, Scout?"

"Sure." I shrugged. "You're the one ghosting me, but apparently, you're pissed about it."

His scowl deepened. "Ghosting you? Maybe, but not without cause." My eyebrow lifted in silent question, so he continued. "'You've been dealing with me for weeks. I used you like I do with everyone else. They should just get rid of me. You never liked me. You were putting up with me.' ... Shall I go on?"

With every quote, my eyes widened, and more laughter broke free. "Wow." I took a step back, shaking my head. "Woowow." I breathed out, turning away from him to look at my stuff before turning back to him. "You assumed I was talking about you while eavesdropping on my conversation, huh? And instead of talking to me about it *like a man*, you threw a temper tantrum because that's the only thing Abel Clarke is good at." I shook my head in disbelief, even though he was still scowling like the sight of me made him sick.

"If you weren't talking about me, then who are you talking about?" he finally asked, a bit too defensively.

I laughed, shaking my head. "Does it matter? You were so convinced it was you that you were ready to ignore me for the

rest of our lives as opposed to asking me what was going on.”

We were both stubborn people, that much I was sure of, so as I held his gaze, I was pretty confident he wasn't going to back down or admit he did wrong. Then, his face fell.

“You're right. I'm sorry.” He looked genuinely sheepish. “I guess when I heard you speaking like that, it hit a nerve I didn't know I had. Not that I'm trying to make excuses because nothing can excuse my behavior, but it hurt, and my reaction to being hurt is to run.”

I nodded as I continued to stare at him. I couldn't fault him for that answer. Of course, I felt that way sometimes too. The easiest thing is to run, but as I said to Naya earlier, I wanted a man who would cross heaven and earth for me. Someone who would wade through the stickiness of his feelings to fight for me instead of running in overwhelm.

“I don't know if I can forgive you for reacting that way,” I finally admitted. “If I'd heard you say something similar, I would've confronted you about it. I would've wanted to know your side of things before deciding to cut you out of my life without looking back.”

Chapter 12

Abel

“MAYBE I’M a few hours too late. But when I realized what I was letting slip through my fingers, I bought a ticket. I was planning to go to Chicago and hunt you down if that’s what it took. I planned to do whatever it took to convince you that what we felt was real.”

She looked unconvinced, so I stepped forward pleadingly, trying to push the spreading headache back. Being hungover and trying to win back the woman I loved was not meant to work together. But I would make it work. If only because all these cameras were still pointing at us, and the last thing I needed was to look sloppy while confessing my heart and soul to this woman.

It would’ve been better if we had made our way somewhere more private, but beggars can’t be choosers, and I planned to beg if need be.

“And what if I told you that buying a plane ticket and going to Chicago wasn’t enough? Then what? What would you do? Would you give up?”

Honestly, I didn’t have a plan. I had hoped this would work out. If it didn’t, I’d pivot and find another way to convince her, but it was a bridge I hoped I wouldn’t have to cross. “No. I wouldn’t give up because, as crazy as it is, I’ve fallen in love with you in less than a week, Scout. They sent you to me to clean up my act, and in doing so, you cleaned up my life. You made yourself so integral to it that I can’t even begin to imagine what my life would look like if you weren’t in it because I don’t want to imagine what that looks like.”

She let out a soft laugh. “Well, we both know what that looks like ... a four-hundred-dollar alcohol order on UberEats.”

I laughed, too, even if it wasn't that funny. “I have never been so violently ill as I was on the way here in the car. But I am confident I've puked all the alcohol out of my system.”

She scrunched her nose at the image, making me chuckle again, forgetting I was supposed to be groveling for a second.

“Okay, but that doesn't answer my question, Abel.”

I nodded, quickly growing serious once more. “Honestly? I'm not sure. I hoped this would work, but if I had to ... I'd do anything.”

“Anything?” She said in disbelief.

With another nod, I continued, “I guess what I'm trying to say is that if I had to, I would give it all up. I would give up the fame, the fortune, the glitz, the glam, the movies ... Everything. I would quit acting to prove that whatever this is, it's the most important thing in my life. The only thing I need is the magic I feel when I'm with you, the butterflies in my stomach every time we kiss, the desperate need that fills me every time you give me one of those smiles that tells me you're going to be a pain in my ass, but I'm going to love every minute of it. Those are the only things I need. Just you. The rest is all filler, and compared to you, it's meaningless.”

Taking my chance, I held my hand. It was such a simple gesture, but it has so much meaning. She had to make a choice, was knowing I'd give it all up for her enough?

She sighed. Her eyes drifted across the crowd of people watching us. As we spoke, audience reactions echoed around us, but like every time I was with Scout, none of it mattered. It was just her and I, and the rest was white noise.

“For the love of God, don't quit your job. We can't both be unemployed.” She offered me a smile as she took my hand.

My eyebrows lifted to my hairline. “What do you mean both unemployed?”

“It’s a long story. Maybe it’s time we head to the first-class lounge to speak in private?” She looked hopeful, and I was about to crush her dreams.

“The only ticket they had was for economy. I’m at the back of the plane.” I tried not to sound too disappointed but failed miserably when Scout laughed.

“God, imagine Abel Clarke having to sit with us commoners.” She winked playfully before tugging my hand and pulling me through the crowd back to where she left her bag. As she reached for it, I caught up and swooped in.

“I am chivalrous when you let me.”

“Who said I’m letting you? Security! This guy is stealing my bag!” She raised her voice slightly, and I twisted to look around in a panic before turning back to her.

“Hah. You’re hilarious, Girl Scout.”

“I try to be.” She shrugged. “C’mon, let’s find somewhere more private, and I’ll fill you in on the shit show that is my career at the moment.”

“I don’t love the sounds of that. Who do I have to fire?”

She glanced at me, her eyes glittering with love. “It’s fine. I’ll figure something out.” Her eyes drifted away from me, lifting to the departure screens. At some point during this conversation, they’d announced our flight was boarding, and it was time to go.

“No more delays. Going to Chicago means meeting my family. Are you up for that?”

I cracked a huge grin. “I promised you I’d follow you anywhere, and I will. Though, I have to warn you. My PA recently told me I don’t vibe well with older women, so I might need your help making a good impression with your mom.”

“Oh, my mom adores you. It’s my dad and brother you’ll have to worry about.”

Epilogue

ABEL

Scout's family did Christmas big. When we walked into her house, if you had told me we were back on set for *The Naughty List*, I would've believed you. It looked like somebody had walked in and puked Christmas everywhere. Boughs of evergreens wrapped every surface, holly hung over thresholds, and baubles were strung everywhere, reflecting the twinkling lights. I'd only been here for two minutes, and I had already counted three trees, and I hadn't been out of the foyer yet.

"Cookie!" A jovial older woman walked out of the kitchen wearing a handmade Christmas-themed apron coated in flour. Her hands were dusty white as well, as she threw them in the air and ran toward Scout, wrapping her arms around her.

"We are so glad you managed to come home early. Just in time for the cookie swap and ugly Christmas sweater party!"

Scout hugged her mom and pulled back. "Yeah, I was hoping to avoid that one," she said with a laugh before glancing at me. "My mom, Sue, and this is—"

"—Oh, my word." If Scout's mom was wearing pearls, she was attempting to clutch them as she stared at me in shock, excitement, and horror. "Abel Clarke! When you told me you were working with him, I mean, I knew you would rub elbows with Hollywood bigwigs, but I never would've imagined bringing one home with you. A bona fide movie star. Is the accent real?" She twittered, making me grin.

“Very much so, Ma’am.”

She gasped and grinned, fanning herself. “I can’t see believe we’re spending Christmas with Abel Clarke. Philip!” She shouted, turning back toward the kitchen. “Get out here and meet Scout’s new beau.”

I lifted an eyebrow and looked at Scout, who shrugged as she stepped on the back of her shoe and pulled her foot off before taking off the second one.

“Shoes off. All my mom’s special Christmas rugs are out.” I nodded and followed her lead, taking my shoes off before helping her with her jacket. While we were busy undressing, Scout’s dad walked out of the kitchen, and my spine instinctively straightened with proper posture. I still wasn’t sure if she’d been screwing with me earlier about having to convince her dad I was worthy of her.

Although, I was still going to have to try and convince Scout of that too.

“Nice to meet you, sir. I’m Abel Clarke.” I walked forward, holding out my hand as he sized me up.

After a beat, he took my hand and shook it. “Nice to meet you. An actor, huh? Why’d you go and settle for someone like Scout?” He tilted his head toward his daughter, who gasped in shock. My eyes wanted to widen, but I quickly schooled my features. Her father looked as serious as a headmaster.

“I’ll have you know,” I said, stepping closer to him until we were nearly toe-to-toe. “Scout is an amazing woman, and anyone in Hollywood—no, anywhere in the world, would be lucky to have her. I’m damn lucky to call her mine. I probably don’t deserve her because of how incredible she is, but I intend to show her every day for the rest of my life that she’s the woman for me. If you can’t see that, we’ll head back to LA because she deserves to be surrounded by people who know how amazing she is.”

It took a conscious effort to keep every expletive out of my vocabulary as I spoke to her father, but I meant every word, even without the excitable punctuation.

He stood there for a minute, still holding my gaze, and finally, he laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. “Good. That’s what I wanted to hear because if you didn’t think she was the most incredible thing in your life, I would have to boot your ass out the door.” He started laughing with a full belly laugh that would’ve rivaled the one I attempted to do as drunk Santa. Mine probably came out a bit more maniacal, whereas his was pure mirth.

Soon enough, Scout’s mom joined in, as did Scout as she rolled her eyes and then looked at me. “Told you you’d have to convince him.”

I let out a sigh of relief and then shook my head. “You didn’t tell me he would come at me like that. That’s one hell of a test, sir.”

He nodded. “Yeah, but you passed it. Any man who comes through this door and can’t put aside his fear of her father to defend her doesn’t deserve her. And if he can’t list all the amazing merits that she has ... Well, he’s even more of a loser.” He sized me up again. “But you’ll do just fine, at least for the holiday season. We’ll see about it in the New Year.”

He gave me a smirk and grabbed his wife’s hand, leading her back to the kitchen. “Come on, you two, we have gingerbreads to make.”

I turned back to Scout, who grinned. “And that’s my parents.”

I nodded. “You know what? It makes complete and utter sense.” I laughed and took her hand, leading her away as her father had. I couldn’t help but hope like hell that’s what we looked like in thirty-some-odd years, and even longer if I had any choice.

“I’m going to have to warn you. I am not the best baker. My baking back home as a kid consisted of buying those premade mixes, rolling them into a ball, tossing them in the oven, and probably forgetting about them. They usually came out black, so I’d eat the dough raw.”

Scout laughed and shrugged. “My mom will do the hard bit for you. It’s mostly the decorating we’re here for.”

We walked into the kitchen to find the island overflowing with baking supplies, and a huge mound of gingerbread was being cut out and doled out to everyone. Standing at the counter, shaggy hair hanging in his eyes and tattoos running up his neck had to be Scout's twin brother. His face flashed through my memories, and I recognized him.

"You're the drummer for Renaissance Revival," I said, pointing a finger at him.

"Tate." He held up a peace sign before grabbing his cookie dough and pulling a bit off, popping it in his mouth.

"Two celebrities for Christmas this year, aren't we lucky?" Scout's mom said with a grin and rolled out her dough. Tate threw another piece in his mouth when she whacked him on the hand with a rolling pin.

"There has to be enough for the cookie swap. It can't all go in your belly."

"Count this as the proceeds going in my belly on Christmas morning." He grinned at her before taking the rolling pin and rolling it out. Once all the dough was rolled out, Sue pulled out a basket of cookie cutters and set them in the middle of the island for us to dig through. Scout grabbed a gingerbread man and passed it to me before helping herself to a Christmas tree and a Santa face.

We worked at cutting out all the dough until I had a little army of gingerbread men sitting in front of me. I picked up a gingerbread man and held it out to her.

"I think he's missing something." I grinned.

She lifted her eyebrow. "Yeah, what's he missing?"

I leaned in and took a bite of the leg, leaving a distinctive set of teeth marks along the edge. "Help me! My leg!" I lifted the tone of my voice, pretending to be the gingerbread man, and she let out a snort before grabbing another gingerbread man and biting his head off.

"This one's from Sleepy Hollow." She grinned as I brushed my thumb against the corner of her mouth where a bit of cookie dough hung. She grabbed my wrist and brought my

thumb to her mouth, licking the dough off as we held each other's gazes.

"Can you two not do that in front of other people?" Tate asked, rolling his eyes.

She turned and elbowed her brother. "Just because you aren't getting some, don't act like the rest of us can't."

To my horror, Scout's dad started laughing as I glanced over at him, and he kissed his wife.

"Tate was talking to somebody—that bandmate's friend," Sue said, snapping her fingers together as she tried to remember. "What was her name again?"

Tate shook his head. "Doesn't matter what her name is. Nothing's going on there. She doesn't even live in LA. She was visiting Skye."

"Why does she have to live in LA?" his mom asked.

"Because I live in LA," he said like it was completely obvious. "She lives in some place called Pleasant Lake and goes to school there. The last thing she needs is a long-distance boyfriend."

"Do you like her, Tate?"

"Doesn't matter, does it?" He sounded defensive. It felt like there was a story he wasn't sharing with his family, and I couldn't help but wonder if that had to do with my being there. So, I wrapped an arm around Scout's waist and squeezed her.

"I'm going to take our bags upstairs and find a bathroom." She glanced at me and nodded, seemingly guessing what I was up to. I walked back to the front door, grabbed our bags, and headed to find the bedroom.

Scout

My brother insisted nothing was happening with this girl, though my twin senses said something different. I could feel that he was hurting. And apparently, he wasn't ready to talk about it yet. But I would get it out of him before Christmas was over.

Tonight's cookie swap and Ugly Christmas Sweater party was an annual event hosted by my parents with all their friends. They'd lived in the same house for as long as I could remember, so they knew everybody on the street.

Every year, instead of worrying about fussing over food, my mom had the event catered. All we had to do was worry about making the cookies and showing up. The only trouble was Abel didn't have an ugly Christmas sweater, so we had to run out to get him one.

"How about this one?" I held out a gaudy knit sweater depicting a fat Santa stuck at the top of the chimney, two stuffed legs flopping helplessly off the chest.

He cringed and then laughed. "That thing is the most awful thing I've ever seen."

I nodded. "That is exactly the reason why you buy it."

He laughed and then flipped through the other offerings on the table. "Oh, this one lights up," I said, leaning over him to press the button on the shirt. Immediately it played Jingle Bells, while the bubbles that hung off it lit up in time to the tune.

He turned to look at me. "You're kidding, right?"

I laughed. "This isn't for Vogue. It's for my family party."

"Exactly," he said, "which means it has to be the worst of the worst."

I grinned at him. "Now you're getting it."

"How offended would your parents be? He asked as he stared at one sweater on the table.

I thought about it for a minute and then shook my head. "They're pretty unflappable. Not much comes to mind that I think would be off limits."

He lifted one sweater that read, "I have a big package for you," with a naked Santa and a box coming off the sweater covering his dick. "So, this isn't off limits?"

I let out a loud snort and then nodded. "No, that is definitely the one you're wearing."

He grinned and dropped his arms, leaning to press his lips against mine. Butterflies erupted in my stomach once more. I still couldn't get over the fact that here I was with Abel Clarke, TV's sexiest bad boy, and he didn't just want to kiss me or go shopping with me. He wanted to spend forever with me. Just crazy.

"While we're out in town, I still have to get a couple of presents. Do you mind helping me pick some things out for your family?"

I shook my head. "You don't have to do that."

He shrugged. "I know. But your parents are generous for letting me stay with them and spend Christmas with you. We haven't even been dating that long. The best thing I could do to thank them would be to get them presents they've been wanting or needing. You know money is no object."

I rolled my eyes at him. "All right, Daddy Warbucks. Come on. There's a reason I brought you to a department store anyway. I have to pick up a layaway."

Taking his hand, I led him up the escalator to the second floor while thinking about something my mom and dad might want or need. It wasn't lost on me as we made our way through the store how many people stopped to stare. Thankfully not many people approached to ask for autographs or selfies, though. They were too busy with their own Christmas shopping to waste time.

"What about this?" Abel stopped in front of a display of KitchenAid mixers. "I noticed there wasn't one in the kitchen, and she did all that baking without it."

"I mean, yeah, she's always said she wanted one, but she's always said she wanted the professional one that does its own lifting or something. I'm not sure."

"Okay." He let go of my hand to move around the stand, scanning all the labels attached to each mixer. "Here it is. What color do you think she'd want?" He looked at me.

"You're not seriously going to buy my mom a five-hundred-and-fifty-dollar mixer, are you?"

He gave me a look. “I said money’s no object. If this is something she wants, I’m more than happy to get it for her.”

“Okay, but here I was thinking of suggesting a holiday or something. They haven’t been on vacation in forever, especially not alone. You could easily get them a cheap, all-inclusive trip to the Dominican Republic.”

“Do they want to go to the Dominican Republic?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard them specifically say that they want to go to the Dominican Republic. But I have heard them talking about wanting to go on vacation.”

“All right. We can do that too. What color mixer?” He asked, pointing at the machine.

I sighed. “Do they have white? That’ll go with the kitchen.”

He nodded and bent, grabbing the box and rising with it in his arms. “Okay, one thing for your mom. What about your dad?”

“My dad’s into model trains, but you’re not going to find that here. There’s a specialty store he goes to, not that I have any idea what to buy him from there.”

“All right, but I bet if we talk to whoever works there, they might know him and know something about it.”

I nodded. “Yeah, you’re probably not wrong.”

He nodded affirmatively. “Great. Mom and Dad are done. What about your brother?”

“Don’t worry about Tate. Tate has his own money. Drummers don’t make that much money compared to the lead singers, but yeah, he’s also not hurting for wants and needs.”

“Maybe not, but there’s still something we can get him for Christmas, isn’t there? What did you get him?”

“Oh, I got him this jokey gift. It’s an inside joke thing.”

“All right, has he mentioned anything specific to you that we could do?”

“Well, he always said he would love the signed picture of the Rolling Stones on display here. It goes for some ridiculous

amount, so nobody ever buys it.”

“A signed Rolling Stones picture. Okay, take me to it.”

I laughed and shook my head. “You’re insane. You know that, right?”

“Maybe, but I also want to impress your family by buying them—”

“Ridiculous Christmas presents.”

“They’re not ridiculous if they’re things people would enjoy and love.”

“I guess not,” I said. “So does that mean I’m getting anything I want?” I grinned at him, and he laughed.

“You can have a shopping spree if you want.” He nodded over at the women’s department section.

“So, you’re saying I could go through this entire department store and pick out anything I wanted, and you would buy it all for me?”

“If that’s what you want, sure.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed at him. “That is not what I want. But thank you for the gesture.”

Although, as we walked by the women’s department, I paused as my eyes caught sight of a designer dress. I did not need it and had nowhere to wear it, but it was gorgeous.

“Try it on,” he said behind me, his lips pressing against my ear. A shiver coursed through my body. “It would look incredible on you. Come on. Why not?”

Abel

She disappeared behind the door, and I watched through the bottom as her jeans dipped around her ankles. The dressing rooms weren’t busy, too many last-minute shoppers worrying about their gift lists on Christmas Eve to be trying anything on. Even the sales clerk, who was supposed to be watching the spot, was off doing something else because there was *no one* here.

Then a cheeky idea hit me.

I glanced around once more to ensure no one else was there before I moved closer to the door, rapping three times.

“Hang on. I’m struggling with the zipper.”

“I can help.”

The door’s lock clicked, and she pulled it open, revealing her side where she’d been fighting with the fabric. Reaching out, my fingers brushed tenderly along the exposed skin, and when I didn’t immediately begin moving the zipper, Scout turned to look at me, questioning in her eye.

“I confess that as much as I wanted to see you in this dress, now that I do, I only want to take it off you.”

Her eyebrow lifted as her mouth quirked simultaneously. “Off, you say?”

Reaching out, I cupped the side of her cheek and turned her face closer to mine. My lips moved to press against hers, and immediately her hands flew to my chest, pushing me back as her eyes widened fearfully.

“Abel, we’re in the department store,” she whispered as a grin spread across my face.

“I know. So you’re going to have to be quiet. I love your delicious sounds, but you’ll have to swallow them today.”

Her eyes flashed fearfully again before she tightened her hold on my shirt and leaned in, kissing me again. I stepped in closer, backing her against the mirrored wall behind her, and my fingers sought out the zipper at the side of the dress, tugging it. We didn’t want to ruin it. I was, after all, going to buy it for her still so I could see it on her later. But for now, there was only one thing on my mind.

Helping her ease the fabric down her body, it pooled on the floor at her feet, and I helped her step out of it. Guiding her legs apart, my fingers drifted to her ass, and I swiftly lifted her, wrapping her legs around my waist and pinning her between me in the mirror. Our tongues clashed feverishly, desperately taunting and teasing one another. Her hips arched

against mine, rolling and grinding with every press of my hips to hers.

My cock strained against the zipper of my jeans, desperate for release and to be inside her again. One hand dipped between us, tracing the damp triangle of her panties, and I grinned, sucking teasingly on her tongue.

“Not so bashful now, are we?” I smirked. Using my body weight to hold her in place, I freed my second hand long enough to rip the fabric open on both sides, letting the scraps of fabric fall to the ground next to the dress. My next move was to the front of my jeans as I quickly unbuttoned them, freeing my dick from the shackles of my zipper.

It bobbed free in excitement, already seeking the home he longed for, and with one quick thrust, I sent myself to the hilt inside her, moaning in relief as she squeezed around me deliciously.

“Abel,” she whispered, pulling her mouth free as she tilted her head back, her hands sliding into my hair as she fisted the strands between her fingers and yanked. The pinch of pain shot through my spine right to my balls as I drove into her with another rough thrust as she bit her lip to hide her moan.

We were pressed so close, and her heart beat rapidly against her chest and mine. The excitement and the fear of being caught rushed through my veins. My ears strained to hear any noise from outside our change room. As I hurriedly drove into her, nestling my cock inside her tight pussy where it only ever needed to be for the rest of my life, I grinned.

Leaning in closer, I pressed my lips to her ear. “I’m going to put a baby in you for Christmas.”

Her eyes flew open, and she shoved me slightly and whispered back. “You won’t.”

I smirked and nodded. “Yeah, I definitely am.”

“Abel—” she began to say as the tell-tale signs of somebody else entering the change room echoed around us. I covered her mouth as I shook my head, slowing my pace so the slapping echoes of our lovemaking didn’t make its way to our company.

Her tongue flicked against my palm as her eyes said, “*You better not do what you promised.*”

But I only grinned more, taunting her as I thrust to the hilt once again and then slowly ground my hips in a figure eight so she could feel me everywhere as her walls clenched and clamped tightly around my shaft. I bit back my own moan as her tongue continued to flick my hand until I shifted my grip, easing two fingers into her mouth and keeping my eyes on her as I slowly thrust my fingers in time with my cock.

Watching how her eyes rounded as I held her mouth open, slowly fucking it in time with my hips, made my cock ache for release. She was perfection, and now that I had my Girl Scout cookie, there was no way I was ever letting her go.

Desperation to say something or make a sound clouded her features. She held herself back, not wanting to get caught, knowing the kind of scandal it would bring with my name attached to it.

Bringing my mouth back to her ear, I whispered, “Come for me, my beautiful Girl Scout. I want to feel your tight pussy creaming all over my cock.”

Her teeth circled my fingers as she nodded her head, my other hand clamping her ass to hold her in place as I drove her to the finish line. She reached between us, direly rubbing her clit in one final act to get her over the finish line.

As she started to come around me, the delicious sensation of her tightness drove me to my completion. I pulled out one more time to give her one last thrust before filling her—as I promised.

Scout

I had to admit I was a bit nervous about spending Christmas morning with Abel Clarke. We’d only been together less than a week, and taking on each other’s Christmas traditions was bold. I didn’t know what he would expect from spending the holidays with my family or if doing it would end up sending him running in the other direction.

Christmases were so personal, and my family took Christmas seriously. It wasn't a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am sort of affair. It was one of those things that went on and on all day long. Most of the time, we didn't finish opening presents until near Christmas dinner. There have been times in the past when we had to pause opening Christmas presents to have dinner when my grandparents, aunts, and uncles arrived.

Nowadays, though, with everybody a bit older and wiser, it took less and less time. But that didn't mean it wasn't an all-out affair. My mom loved Christmas, so she intended to make it the biggest thing every year and never failed.

Abel wrapped his arms around me and nuzzled my neck with his nose. He smelled like gingerbread because I'm pretty sure he'd helped himself to at least two dozen of the cookies we decorated yesterday.

"We're standing under mistletoe," he whispered in my ear, a grin spreading across his face as he did.

I twisted to look over my shoulder to find he was right. I hadn't even noticed that when I paused to admire the Christmas tree twinkling against the dark, inky sky backdrop.

"Guess that owes means you owe me a kiss," I said with a smile as I turned in his arms to face him.

"I owe you one now and a billion others for the rest of our lives," he whispered before cupping my face and kissing me tenderly. The pleasant knotting in my stomach was something I would never get old or bored of. I hoped I would still feel butterflies in my stomach every time Abel kissed me fifty years from now.

"I know I led you to believe I was going to take you for a shopping spree as your Christmas present when we got back to LA, and I plan to, but I did also get you something else."

"You mean besides the other twenty-five presents you somehow managed to buy yesterday when I wasn't paying attention?" My eyes flicked to the pile of gifts overflowing at my seat back on the couch.

Abel chuckled and shrugged. “What can I say? I’m still groveling. I figured a bunch of presents might convince you that you didn’t make a terrible choice by falling in love with me.”

“Oh, I definitely made a terrible choice,” I said with a grin. “I don’t expect this to be easy. But then again, I don’t imagine that love ever is.” My eyes flicked to my parents as my dad twirled my mom around, and she laughed, throwing her head back. They’d had their fair share of problems, and they’d been together for forty-five years.

“Yeah, well, I’m going to do my best to make sure those problems stay to a minimum.”

I reached out and threaded my fingers through his long hair, pushing it off his face. “I know, and I’m going to do my best too, but it’s unrealistic for us to believe it’s smooth sailing from here on out.”

“No, you’re probably right,” he agreed before kissing my nose. “As long as we know we have each other, no matter what, that’s enough for me.”

I smiled and nodded. “That’s enough for me, too,” he said. “So, you ready for your other present?”

“Always,” I said with a grin.

He reached behind him and pulled out a box—a small box that more or less gave away what it was even though he’d wrapped it neatly in brightly colored paper and topped it with a stick-on bow.

My lungs ceased functioning as my heart stalled in my chest, and I looked up from the box with wide eyes.

He let out a small laugh. “It’s not what you think it is,” he said before nudging the box closer to me. “Open it up, and I’ll explain.”

I lifted an eyebrow and tilted my head. “I don’t know if that means it’s going to be what I want or if it’s going to be disappointing.”

He laughed and nudged the box to me again. “Open it, Girl Scout.” I sighed and took the box from him, carefully peeling the paper off. It was still a velvet ring box, and then I flipped it open to find it was empty.

My eyes jumped back to him as he laughed. “Did you actually think I was going to propose to you after five days?”

“I don’t know, you’ve done some crazy things. So, I wasn’t about to write this off.”

He laughed harder. “I guess that’s true, and honestly, I did consider buying you a ring, but I didn’t want to rush it for the sake of buying you something. I wanted to make sure that when I put a ring on your finger—and I will—it’s a ring that not only encompasses everything I love about you but is a physical representation of my absolute and total devotion to you and only you. And I definitely wasn’t going to be able to find that in the jewelry section at the department store behind your back yesterday.” I let out a laugh. “So, I bought a box instead.”

He reached out and pulled on the little ribbon that held the pillowed cushion inside the box. As he pulled it, a little note popped out, and he nodded. I took a deep breath and pulled the paper out, carefully unfolding it.

To my Girl Scout,

This last week has been a crazy whirlwind. I don’t always do or say the right thing, so I thought if I tried to put my thoughts onto paper, everything I wanted you to know and hear would come out a little more cohesively.

For the last week, I’ve played it like I was fighting back, but truthfully, when I saw you, I knew from the minute you broke into my hotel room and threw water all over me, demanding I get up and do everything you asked, that I would. And without question for the rest of my life.

Yeah, I overreacted when I overheard you talking on the phone with your ex-boss. But my heart was so focused on shattering because you didn’t love me back the way I loved you that I had no room to think about anything else. So I need you to know

how much I love you and everything I would willing to do for you.

I've officially cut ties with my talent agency and told them I have new representation. Yeah, it's a stupid Christmas present —giving you a job. But I know how incredible you'll be at this and how much it means to you.

Plus, I couldn't think of anything else that would be a better gift from me to you to show you how much I believe in you.

*I also reached out to a few friends, and they would give you a chance at their representation. So, if you are willing to accept my help, I would love to back **The Girl Scout Talent Agency of America.***

I love you, Abel.

My eyes turned to his face as I stared at him in mute surprise.

“You fired your talent agency?”

Abel cracked up. “That’s the only thing you took out of that note?” he said in shock and laughed harder.

“Well, no, obviously not. But that is the first thing I’m thinking about. Do you know how crazy of a move that is? When your career is already on the line? I have connections, but I don’t have as many connections as a talent agency has.” I intended to carry on my tirade when suddenly Abel leaned forward and slammed his lips against mine.

“I don’t care about any of that,” he said when he pulled back. “As I said in the note, I believe in you and trust you. I know there may be hiccups for the next few months as we work to establish your agency as an official business. But I can live with that because even if I never worked another day as an actor, I would be happy spending the rest of my life as your husband.”

I swallowed slowly and stared at him. “I know this wasn’t a marriage proposal, Abel, but I accept.”

I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him deeply with every ounce of love and devotion. My heart pounded at the

prospect of our future, but Abel would be by my side for whatever came our way.

“Imagine what people are going to say when we show up at the New Year’s Eve wrap party and tell everyone we fell in love on the set of *The Naughty List*,” he said with a grin.

I shook my head. “Honestly, I was on that set ... and I don’t think we were the only ones.”

Abel grinned and leaned in to kiss me once more.

Naya said I wasn’t the romance heroine ... But honestly, it felt like I was because here I was, getting my happily ever after.