



Fake

CHRISTMAS
GIRLFRIEND

HALEY TRAVIS

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Also by Haley Travis

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This might not be a big deal. Chill.

I take a deep, steadying breath, then another sip of coffee. But even the amazing brew at Ray's Diner doesn't cheer me up as I carefully reread the email from my boss, Parker.

Up till recently, he loved everything I sent him. He lost his mind over my fun and modern End of Summer Beach Vibes photos and graphics. Then Back to School, Corporate Ambiance, Autumn Charm, Halloween, and Thanksgiving – he seemed to like them all, calling the sets “exactly what I've been looking for.”

To back up and explain: I create the images for users to drop into their pages on the List-Go-Do app. I come up with graphics for every occasion, season, and theme I can think of. It's one of the little details that keeps the app growing so quickly. Users drop in the elements I create, and their layout is instantly artsy.

But then Parker said my Late Autumn Cozy set was “fine”. The Let's Start Winter set was “not bad”. Now, apparently, my Christmas Cheer collection was “totally uninspired”.

Well, Reindeer poop on a stick.

My fingers tap nervously on the formica table as I sink back into the old-fashioned teal booth. Of course I suck at Christmas. I haven't had a good one since I was seven.

What I should be doing is brainstorming ideas for the New Year New Vibe elements, but I can't think about productivity and goal setting right now. I know Parker took a huge chance hiring me with so little experience, and I've busted my butt trying to create amazing content for the past several months.

Christmas is a huge deal. And I just messed it up. Big time.

I need to keep this job. The thought of having to move back in with one of my uncles makes my skin crawl. Not just from the guilt of being a burden, but because it would be a huge step backward.

"More coffee, or should I switch you to pie?" Claudia, my favorite waitress, arches a sassy eyebrow.

My smile is forced. "Maybe just a couple of those holiday sugar cookies?"

"Sure." She glances toward the booth next to me. "Just let me grab the special Christmas plate for you. We only have one left."

She clears the empty plate, and the man typing away on his laptop doesn't even notice or look up.

It gives me the opportunity to stare openly at the most handsome man I've ever seen. His massive shoulders barely fit into the booth. His profile is striking, with strong, classic features. There's something about his long, thick fingers tapping precisely away at the keys that makes my lower belly flutter.

It also gives me an idea.

Before I can lose my nerve, I whip out my camera and step over to the next booth. "This is going to sound strange, but may I please take some photos of your hands while you're typing?"

When he turns toward me, I'm struck by his magnificent mossy green eyes, and how warm they are as he smiles, puzzled. "Sure."

I take a series of photos of his hands, all the way up to his mouthwateringly-thick forearms. "I work for a productivity

app,” I explain, snapping away. “I have tons of photos of ladies’ hands on the keyboard, and plenty of businessmen. You have really masculine hands.”

His fingers start to shake and I look up to see that he’s laughing silently. “I’m gonna go with...thank you? I think that’s the weirdest compliment I’ve ever heard.”

I can feel my cheeks flaming.

“Here you go.” Claudia sets three Christmas tree sugar cookies on a plate rimmed with golden bells on my table.

“Seasonal snacks. Solid choice,” the man laughs.

“She always needs a constant stream of seasonal photos,” Claudia volunteers. “But it seems a bit late for new Christmas stuff at this point, isn’t it?”

“My boss didn’t like my first attempt at holiday stuff, so I’m trying to get re-inspired and come up with some more material.” It’s hard to tear my eyes away from this man’s gorgeous smile, even though my blush is burning my face by now.

Claudia’s eyes twinkle. “You know, Josh here is about to go to the most Christmassy town on the planet for the holidays. Maybe he could tell you about it?” She bounces away, her dark, glossy ponytail swishing behind her.

“Please.” He gestures for me to sit in his booth, then extends his hand. “Josh Cutler.”

“Sadie Sheppard.” His hand is warm and strong. Sexy, somehow. Normally it’s hard for me to speak with new people, but I can’t let him know how timid I am. I hate when people think I’m a broken little bird. “So, most Christmassy town on the planet, hey?”

His wide grin shows off perfect teeth. “Yeah. I go back to visit my family a couple of times a year, but Christmas is a huge deal there.”

I nod toward his laptop. “So you’re trying to get ahead of work before you leave?”

His exaggerated sigh raises his thick shoulders, then lowers them again. The urge to run my hand along the top of them to feel the line of muscle through his black t-shirt is sudden and startling.

“I wish. I’m actually trying to figure out how I can visit my parents without spending too much time with my cousins.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Are they”...I mouth the word...“assholes?”

Josh’s big laugh rings out around us, making me smile. “My two cousins used to be relatively good guys, but oh man, their wives.” He runs a hand through his short, dark hair as his eyes roll so theatrically that I can’t help but smirk. “Amy is pretty quiet, but the other one, Tara...” His jaw tightens. “You know the saying, if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all?”

“Yeah.”

He mimes zipping his lips shut, locking them, and flinging away the key.

“Oh. Wow. That bad?”

His head tips back and forth, bringing my attention to his slight scruff of beard. I find myself wondering if it’s scratchy or soft. “I don’t think she’s evil, so much as one of those people for whom being married is the only important thing in the universe. Therefore, it follows that anyone who’s single is either to be pitied, or a waste of space. She’s very judgy.”

“That’s awful.” I pull my eyes from his to stare down at the table, instantly snapping into problem-solving mode. “Well, do you have high school friends there? Maybe you could hang out with them, and only see your cousins at big family events where she’s more likely to be on her best behavior?”

Josh’s nose crinkles adorably as he smiles. “Most of my high school friends have wives or girlfriends. I wouldn’t want to be a third wheel. The thing is, with a partner, you can easily pick and choose the family events you want to go to. Everyone

understands that you need alone time as a couple.” He pushes his laptop to the side. “Do you have any big Christmas plans?”

My lips tilt into the bland smile I always wear during the twice-monthly video calls for work. “No plans.”

His face completely falls. “No winter festivities at all?” It’s touching that he looks genuinely sad for me.

“Nope.”

His fingers twitch as if he wants to reach out to hold my hand in sympathy. Nah, I’m probably imagining that. “I’m sorry, Sadie. I mean, I know that lots of people have low-key holidays that aren’t anywhere near the over-the-top vibe of Holly Valley, but—” He stops as my eyes snap wide open. “What is it?”

My bottom lip quivers. “You’re going to *Holly Valley*?”

“Yeah. You’ve heard of it?”

My eyelids fall closed. I can’t tell him that I lived there with my parents until they were killed in a car crash when I was seven. I also can’t tell him that my last happy holiday season was in Holly Valley, even though I don’t remember a single concrete detail. The two uncles who were forced to take me in never let me visit that “pitiful small town” again, and certainly not for Christmas.

Uncle Jeff has always been kind of stupid, and probably doesn’t realize that the holidays mean something to other people even if they mean jack squat to him. Uncle Greg, on the other hand, just didn’t want to pay for plane tickets. So I’ve never left Kingsville.

“Hey.” Josh’s deep voice is soft as he taps my hand gently. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Sadie. I’m sorry.”

Swallowing hard, I force a smile. “It’s fine. It’s just that I lived there when I was tiny. Then I had to...move here.”

It feels like Josh can see into my soul as he studies me. Then his lips fall open and his eyes light up. “I’ve got it.”

“Got what?”

He holds up his hands. “Okay, this is going to sound nuts, but hear me out. Come with me to Holly Valley. You’ll get the most magical Christmas photos ever. Wholesome small town charm. Everything there is picturesque – the snow, the lights, the decorations. It’s beyond wild.”

Go on a trip with a total stranger? My mind is short circuiting.

“I’ll drive you around town so you can take photos, keeping us away from my cousins-in-law as much as possible. Plus if I’m with you I can avoid my old drinking buddies that I have nothing in common with anymore.” He grins. “Guys always drop out of that group when they have girlfriends.”

“Oh. Um...”

“No *um*. I’ll pay for the flight, food, everything. We’ll tell my family that we’ve been dating for a few months and are keeping things casual for now which is why I never mentioned you before.”

I can’t even think of what to say. My mind has clearly frozen and turned to slush. How could I possibly spend several days with a guy this gorgeous? And...be close with him?

Josh turns to stop Claudia just as she’s walking by with the coffee pot. “Do you think that Sadie should pretend to be my girlfriend and come home with me for a fabulous old-fashioned Christmas?”

“Absolutely.” There’s something almost devilish in her eyes. “For the record, Sadie, I trust him. Josh has been coming here for ages. Definitely not an axe murderer.”

He reaches out again to give my hand a friendly tap. “I promise that you’ll have fun, and get a ton of amazing photos. Even beyond the holiday stuff, it’s a winter wonderland.”

Claudia moves the cookie plate from my table and places it right in front of me. “Go on. Give in to the holiday magic,” she giggles, giving me a wink on the side that Josh can’t see.

Why not? This will be amazing for my job, but more importantly, I don’t have any real happy Christmas memories. Plus, spending time in close quarters with the most gorgeous

man I've ever seen, who already seems to understand me a bit? I'd be a fool not to.

The second I begin to nod, I'm rewarded with a dazzling grin that lights up Josh's entire face.

“Okay, I'm in. When do we leave?”

JOSH

My smile feels like it's going to split my face as I drive to pick up Sadie after work. Last night at Ray's I'd been trying to get up the nerve to ask her out when I realized that bringing her to Holly Valley would solve both of our problems.

Okay, it's not really any of my business if someone has zero plans for the holidays, yet the hollow look in her eyes struck me through the heart and made it impossible not to obey the deep urge to help her. It was past a deep sadness. It was like... She was resigned to being alone.

As I drove her home, I got a few more details about her uncles, who sound like assholes, to be honest.

I shared a bit more about my family, too, although I glossed over some of the "stuff". Stuff like my mother being ridiculously jealous of my Aunt Stephanie for assisting with the weddings when her sons Eric and Shawn got married off, and is now theoretically on her way to grandmthood. My mother is an extremely family-oriented person, and the thought of her brood expanding fills her with a joy that I honestly find difficult to understand as a man.

Last year it took a lot of energy to not wither under Eric and Shawn's accusatory stares that I hadn't yet manned up and done the same. They didn't understand. I've been trying to build a great life, so that when the right girl does come along, I'll be in a position to give her everything. I've just been

starting to feel like I'm in that place lately. Great career, great house, some good friends. Some stability for my future family.

Pulling up in front of Sadie's building, my cheeks are still stretched from my grin. Even though I'm positive that this will be a great trip for her, I'm determined to make it as comfortable as possible. She's so sweet. Almost... I don't want to say fragile, but delicate. I don't want her to stress about it.

By the time I get to the front door of the small apartment building, she's already walking toward me through the lobby.

"Good afternoon, instant girlfriend."

She seems surprised by my greeting, giggle-snorting and clapping a hand over her mouth. "Good morning, total stranger boyfriend I met in a diner."

Soon after we start driving, Sadie sniffs the air. "Is that—"

"Yes." I point to the giant blue travel mug covered in snowflakes. "Cinnamon hazelnut coffee. It'll keep you going, since we have a lot of shopping to do."

"Define 'a lot', please."

"No stress, I've already called ahead. You just need to try things on. Trust me."

She reaches tentatively for the coffee. "You just happen to have winter-themed tumblers?"

"No, I bought it for you to keep in my car. To keep any beverages hot longer when we're running around."

Glancing down, her fingers are shaking slightly. At the next red light, I turn to check her eyes. "I'm sorry – did I do something wrong?"

"No, not at all." She gives me an adorable smile. "It's just that nobody's ever been this thoughtful before. Thank you."

Hmm. That says to me that Sadie has never been in a relationship before. Or if she has, the guy wasn't attentive enough. Jerk.

By the time we get to my usual outdoor equipment store, I've learned that her way of traveling the world is picking movies set in exotic countries and ordering takeout from that region to eat while she watches them. She seems surprised but pleased that I already know about her favorite Korean and Ethiopian restaurants.

Before we walk into the store, I pause. "Sadie, if we're going to pretend that we've been together for a few months for my family, it would probably help if we start practicing now. Is that okay?"

She nods. "Yeah. Um, I'm not really used to being *together* with a guy. So, whatever you think is best, I guess..."

It's just chilly enough that I already know her cheeks will turn pink in a few days when we're out in the snow. It's going to be so cute. I watch her eyes carefully as my arm slips around her waist. She seems fine with it, snuggling closer. I kiss the top of her forehead gently. "Just a bit of touching and cuddling occasionally. And if any topic comes up that we're not sure about, we'll just ramble an answer, then tell the other person about it immediately when we're alone."

"I've watched some comedy improv shows. We'll figure it out."

"Great. Now, let's shop until we drop."

Janice, the sales lady I contacted earlier, comes striding toward us the second we enter. "Sadie, so lovely to meet you. Come with me: I have a huge rack of things for you to go through."

I sit in the official "Husbands and Boyfriends" chairs near the women's section, watching as Janice pulls over a rack with things she's already selected.

"Josh told me your approximate size and coloring, so let's start with these. But, of course, it's whatever you like, dear."

Sadie eyes the rack suspiciously. "I thought I'd just need a warmer coat."

"We have a saying in Holly Valley: there is no bad weather, only bad clothing," I call out. "We're going to be out

in the snow for hours at a time. Best to bundle you up in everything.”

It takes almost an hour for the ladies to select everything on my list, plus a few things that Janice thought of that I hadn't – a long winter coat with a hood, boots with treads that make it easy to walk on ice, a couple of knit caps, soft scarves, warm gloves, several pairs of thick woolen socks, and soft cotton socks to wear under them so they're not itchy.

“That's everything except the lined tights for under dresses, and a couple of zip up hoodies,” Janice says. “We have some lovely soft thermal ones that are perfect for layering on and taking off when you get inside.”

“Oh, no.” Sadie shakes her head. “I have a hoodie at home. This is already way too much.”

Janice shoots me a look, and I nod firmly. She pulls out a plum colored hoodie that matches Sadie's new coat perfectly, running the sleeve coaxingly along Sadie's cheek. “Now, don't you think your boyfriend would enjoy snuggling you even more if you're wearing this?”

Her cheeks turn bright pink. “Okay.”

Once the massive haul is safely in the trunk, I drive to a dress store, then turn to her with a smile. “If you don't like anything here, we can always try somewhere else.”

“Oh. Is your family's Christmas dinner really fancy?”

“No, that's a jeans and sweaters affair. But we'll be going to the Christmas Eve Eve Ball.”

The way she laughs so sweetly makes my chest tighten. “You're going to have to help me with that one.”

“Many people have family events on Christmas Eve. So the big town party is on the night of the twenty-third. Christmas Eve Eve, get it?”

She laughs again, then stops suddenly, her eyes wide with alarm. “The whole town? How many people am I going to be meeting, anyway?”

Reaching out, I thread her fingers through mine. “I won’t leave your side. Nobody will expect you to remember their names when you’re meeting everyone at once. We won’t even be having real conversations – just wishing people happy holidays, complimenting the ladies on their dresses, and then —” I strike as dramatic a pose as I can muster while in the driver’s seat. “We dance!”

“Oh. Um. That sounds like...a lot.”

I drop my arms. “Do you like potato salad?”

Her beautiful lips fall open for a second. “Of course. Why?”

“Because Mrs. McKenzie makes the most incredible potato salad on the planet, and always brings a ton of it to this party. Honestly, this stuff is legendary, but you have to attend the party to experience it.” I raise an eyebrow, attempting to look serious. “It might actually change your life.”

“Sorry. I just get nervous about crowds sometimes.” Sadie tries to stop herself from grinning. “But life-changing potato salad will be worth the nerves of being put on display in front of a huge group of strangers.”

“Not strangers. A bunch of random townspeople, and a few of my friends and relatives. Then we make every excuse to be alone, seeing as how it’s our first Christmas together and all.”

Sadie grins, nodding as we go into the store.

I have to admire how organized Charlene the sales lady is. The lovely older woman immediately treats Sadie like a close girlfriend. After flipping through a dozen dresses from the choices Charlene pulled ahead of time, Sadie tries on three of them.

They’re all breathtaking on her. That said, my gorgeous girl could wear a garbage bag with an electrical cord for a belt and still be the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen.

My heart stops as she twirls for Charlene slowly in a long dark purple gown that makes her auburn hair and fair skin glow.

I'm already thinking of her as mine.

Is that wrong? Is it too soon? I can't help it. Every second we're close, every time I have an excuse to touch her, I crave more.

I'll have to be careful. She's being such a sweetheart to come away with me at all. She clearly needs this holiday, and feeling any pressure would ruin everything. I'm going to have to pick up every single cue she gives me.

After more twirling and fussing, Sadie and Charlene have narrowed it down to the dark purple gown, a silver dress, and one in a deep forest green. Apparently these are the colors that complement Sadie's coloring.

The way the silky fabric clings to her graceful curves, though, I'm not thinking about colors at all.

"Now, these silver heels go with all three dresses," Charlene says. "Since you're going to be dancing, let's go with them since they're the most comfortable. And if we've decided on the shoes, maybe the dress choice will be easier."

Sadie looks toward me. "What do you think?"

"All of them."

She gasps, then runs to me to whisper in my ear. "You're being incredibly generous with all of this, but these dresses are *really* expensive."

Clasping her hands, I rock her back and forth slightly. "All of them have swishy skirts for dancing, and make you look like an angel. Money is not a concern for me, so why don't we get them all?"

Once again, I catch a glimpse of that almost haunted little smile. As if no one has ever been generous with her before.

Charlene selects a small evening bag that matches the shoes, along with a simple rhinestone necklace and earrings set that works with all three dresses. I also insist on them picking out an everyday dress, and a few pants and light sweater options, some shoes, and...well, whatever they found in the lingerie section.

Once we're back in the car, I ask, "Clothing, done. Do you need a suitcase?"

Sadie's eyes snap wide. "Suitcase? I was just going to shove things in my backpack."

I start driving to a luggage store. "And if we ever go camping, that will be great. But let's do this right."

By the time I haul two trips' worth of stuff into her apartment, Sadie looks dazzled by the new rolling suitcase, shoulder bag for essentials on the plane, a purse just because I caught her admiring it, and cute little travel containers for soaps and shampoos.

"I can't believe this. How can I ever thank you?"

Looking around her cramped studio apartment, I want to ask her to come live with me immediately. Want to ask her if she'll be my girlfriend. Want to ask her if she's feeling the same deep, magnetic pull that's making it nearly impossible to keep my distance from her.

Opening my arms wide, I narrowly avoid touching both walls across her kitchen. "I think one giant hug should do the trick."

She leans in, her delicate frame pressing against me as her arms circle my chest, grabbing my back tightly. "Thank you, Josh. This means so much to me."

And you already mean so much to me.

"Please remember that when Mom is forcing more dessert on us, and insisting we hit up every single attraction in town."

"Well, I'm going to be warm and well dressed for every occasion." She looks up at me with a dazzling grin. "Oh! And I have a great camera. People love it when you ask to take their photo. Maybe that will make people like me."

Leading down, I place a gentle kiss on her cheek. "Sadie, everyone is going to love you."

As I stroke her back gently, it's clear that she can feel this connection too. With every breath, her perky little breasts rub

against me, and her fingers slowly explore the back of my shoulders.

Everything about her is so soft and inviting. Exactly what I've dreamed of in the perfect woman.

Her bed is only five steps away. For one blissful moment, I imagine lifting her, lying her down on the quilt, and kissing her until she's moaning softly, breathless and ready...

No.

Forcing myself to straighten up, I step back, reaching for the door knob. "Sleep well, my winter fashion model girlfriend."

She laughs. "Sweet dreams, my ridiculously over-the-top generous phony boyfriend."

"I'll pick you up at eight tomorrow morning."

In the mirrored elevator, I can't help noticing that I look brighter. More relaxed. Everything about Sadie is good for me.

But now I'm about to throw this sweet girl into the intensity of my family in the middle of the most frantic holiday season in the most Christmassy town in the country.

I hope it's not too much for her.

Okay, reality check: I've never been in a relationship before. So I don't know what is "normal" in either a fake or a real situation.

But Josh having coffee and a croissant ready for me as he carries my things to the car while wearing a cute black chauffeur cap? Being whisked into the first class lounge at the airport for fresh, melty chocolate chip and caramel cookies? Him insisting that I take the window on the plane? Plush, soft seats roomy enough even for Josh's long legs?

It's unlike anything I've ever known. Being plunged into luxury and receiving so much caring attention is genuinely overwhelming. I keep catching myself with tears in my eyes.

Not to mention suddenly being close with a gorgeous man who has started slipping an arm around me whenever it's convenient! It's a whole new level of strange that makes my stomach flutter. My hand won't stop nervously smoothing down my hair, either.

Yet chatting is so easy with Josh. I've never been naturally talkative. Even with my coworkers when we video chat, or Claudia at the diner, it's always taken me weeks to warm up to someone.

Josh makes me feel free.

We use the flight to grill each other about our families, and decide what details about our relationship we'll share when asked. Josh agrees that we should keep it simple. We'll describe our meeting in the coffee shop pretty much how it

really was, just say it was four months ago. We make a quick list of movies we've both seen, so we can mention that we've watched them together. Restaurants we've both been to. Kingsville attractions that we've both visited.

He also explains what he does for a living. His dad is a stockbroker, and Josh and his older brother Dylan followed in his footsteps right out of school. Apparently Josh always felt like he was helping the money more than helping people, so he left the industry.

Now he's a computer programmer. He coded an app for gyms to track their busy and slow times, and post both the anticipated attendance and live usage on their websites, so that people can schedule their workouts for less crowded times, if possible.

Staff do a quick headcount every half an hour of the entire gym, as well as honing in on the weight room, the cardio area, and fitness classes. This helps people know whether or not it's going to be packed, and helps them get out to the gym more often because it will be a more pleasant experience. It's increased attendance in every place it's been implemented.

"What's the software called?"

Josh groans. "CutlerCount. I had to think of something in seconds before I sent it to a few gyms for testing and I just blanked. Pretty terrible, huh?"

"It's not so bad. Cutler... cutting edge... I think it's kind of techy."

His heavy hand squeezes my knee gently. "I'm very lucky to have you, supportive and immediate girlfriend."

I love how easily he makes me laugh. "Thanks. And thanks for these cushy seats, generous but totally bogus boyfriend."

With all of the money Josh has already spent on our little adventure, I'm going to have to do everything I can to live up to my end of the bargain and sell this relationship.

That's not going to be a problem on the surface. I'm pretty sure that there are cartoon stars in my eyes every time I look at

Josh. It's official: I'm absolutely bonkers about him.

Yet I don't know how much of that I should show in front of his parents. Would it ruin everything to tell Josh I want to drop the whole "fake" aspect from our relationship and make it real? It seems very soon for that. And considering that he's going to have to deal with a bunch of family drama, I don't want to create any more stress for him.

From the way he talks about his family, it's clear that he feels a deep need to keep up with his brother and cousins. I'm not sure whether it's an actual competition on their part, or all in his head.

He's also kind and generous with his time and attention. Even during the short wait before the plane took off while we were on our phones, he was in some coder chat room assisting someone with a problem.

Which reminds me of my own job and the do-over holiday photo set for my boss. It has to be my very best work. I need to start with a few pics tonight, and have an entire new collection by midday tomorrow.

Yikes. The pressure in my brain is rivaling the pressure in my ears as we begin to descend.

Josh threads his fingers through mine, and points with his other hand. "I chose seats on this side so you can see the entire town at once."

Peering out the window, I gasp. It's a postcard. Something out of a movie. It can't be real.

Holly Valley is a legit valley, nestled beside a mountain range that probably protects it from the strongest winds. They already have a huge amount of snow – a crisp, white blanket spread over the cutest little town that stretches out to countless farms all around.

Josh laughs, a deep, low rumble as he leans closer, and lifts our clasped hands to his heart. "I know, right? Every time I come home, it hits me right here."

I turn back to his soft gaze. I love that he's sentimental and has no problem showing it.

“Now,” he murmurs in my ear, sending a sparkling warmth right through me, “we’re about to be hijacked by an elf, and I should warn you that my mother shrieks when she’s happy. Are you ready?”

He looks deeply into my eyes, our bodies already moving toward each other all by themselves as his thumb strokes my hand. Does Josh really like me? Is that possible?

My head is swimming as he escorts me through the small airport. After picking up our luggage, I insist on rolling my own new suitcase. He uses it as an opportunity to hold my hand proudly as we head to the main doors.

“Say candy cane!”

Beside the entrance is a huge backdrop with a candy mountain painted on one side, and a Christmas tree on the other. Couples are posing together as a short, stout man in a bright red and green elf costume takes their photos.

“I’m sure they’re not as wonderful as your pictures,” Josh says, his breath warm in my ear as he leans down. “But it’s tradition, for any couples arriving for the holidays. Cool?”

“Sure. Is my hair okay?”

His palm lands softly on the top of my head, stroking downward. Then he twirls one of the loose waves at the end. “Gorgeous.”

As we watch the people ahead of us, I notice every other couple is kissing for their photos. A pressure builds in the center of my chest. A lump.

Josh senses my tension. “I’ll give you a big kiss on the cheek for our photo. It’ll be great.”

I’m not sure whether I’m relieved or disappointed. “I’ll follow your lead.”

Josh unlocks his phone and hands it to the elf. Then we drop our luggage at the side and stand in front of the tree.

“Merry Kissmas!” the elf cries out. He takes many photos one after the other as Josh slips an arm around me, giving me a

loud, smacking kiss on the cheek. I grin, then look up and off to the side, as if I'm shocked by his behavior.

I've never really modeled before, but I've dealt with enough stock photography that I know what people want. Sure enough, the crowd around us laughs and cheers.

We pose for a few photos in the center of the backdrop, holding hands and gazing dreamily into each other's eyes. Then the elf waves us over to the candy mountain. "Time for some sweetness!" he chirps brightly. "Why don't you give him a kiss, pretty lady?"

Josh slips an arm around my waist, holding me snugly against him. His fingers spread over my waist, and his thumb moves in gentle circles at my lower back. It's such a comforting gesture. As if he already knows that I'm anxious about being put on the spot.

He looks directly toward the elf with a huge grin, as I stretch up on my tiptoes. I kiss his cheek while kicking one foot up behind me like they do in the movies...knocking over my suitcase in the process.

Josh's head swivels toward the noise, catching my lips against his.

I melt.

I barely hear the elf shouting, "Hold it! That's perfect!"

Josh's fingers press through my sweater and tight against my skin as he pulls my body to his. The kiss deepens, our lips part...and suddenly we're a million miles from Earth, floating in a perfect bubble where nothing exists but us and our perfect, tender kiss.

This is beyond holiday magic. As his lips press to mine, our breath mingling, my heartbeat thumping loudly in my ears, I feel like our connection is just beginning.

A shriek snaps us back to reality as we step apart.

"I warned you about the shrieking," Josh mutters under his breath. "My mother is here."

He collects his phone, we grab our luggage again, then suddenly I'm having the daylights hugged out of me by a petite woman with brassy blonde hair, wearing a bright red sweater with jingling bells at the neck line.

"I'm Miriam," she murmurs in my ear. "You're perfectly lovely, Sadie. I'm so excited to have you here for the holidays."

She pulls away, grinning, positively glowing with delight. Behind her is a smiling older man with kind eyes. "I'm Mark. So glad that you're joining us, Sadie."

My uncles always treated me like a burden, and I felt so guilty asking for even basic essentials.

These total strangers are genuinely thrilled that I'm about to spend Christmas with them. I feel Josh's hand on my shoulder, rubbing gently as if he knows that I'm already overwhelmed.

Then I burst into tears.

I feel Sadie's breathing start to hitch just before she begins to cry.

Pulling her into my chest, I stroke her hair. "It's okay, baby," I whisper. "Let it out." Rocking her gently in my arms, I realize that calling her baby feels deeply satisfying and totally right.

Mom looks horror stricken until I shake my head at her. "She'll be okay. She's a nervous flier, that's all, and she's been stressed from work."

"I'm so sorry," Sadie snuffles. "I guess I'm just wound too tight."

Mom presses a tissue into her hand. "Don't you worry about it a bit, honey. This place can be a lot to take, having so much Christmas cheer shoved up your butt the second you walk in. Let's get you home – you need some cocoa."

Dad chuckles. "And by cocoa, she means Irish cream liqueur sprinkled with chocolate." Mom elbows him affectionately as he grabs Sadie's suitcase.

Sadie looks up at me with damp eyes, blinking quickly. "I'm so sorry. I'm not usually this emotional."

My lips graze the top of her hair. "It's fine if you are." My arm tightens around her a little more. "Plus, that means I get to take care of you. Bonus boyfriend points, right?" Her soft smile is doing strange things to my pulse.

By the time we're settled into Dad's Jeep and driving on the snowy roads, Sadie is more like herself again.

"I can't believe this place," she murmurs as we drive through the main part of town. Her eyes are huge as I squeeze her hand.

"Well, this is Holly Valley at its maximum cheery level," Dad says. "When the cheer reaches up to your eyebrows, you know you've had enough."

"Don't forget to stop at Happy Home," Mom breaks in.

"Of course not."

"They're always like this," I whisper to Sadie. "Reminding each other about anything and everything. I think it's because they've been together so long they've run out of stuff to talk about."

"Being cheeky like that won't get you any extra sugar cookies," Mom sings out from the front seat.

When we reach the bakery, Mom insists that Sadie come in with her to help choose desserts for tonight's dinner. She looks thrilled, pulling her camera from her bag and leaping out of the Jeep.

The second we're alone, Dad meets my eye in the rear view mirror. "She's a great girl, son. I'm proud of you for settling down."

"It's very early days. We're not that serious yet."

"Sure you aren't. I see the way you look at her. You're not just messing around."

"We have...potential," I explain carefully. "I don't want to put too much pressure on her right away."

Dad sighs with that slight growl that says he's a bit frustrated with me. "Son, when you find a good woman you let her know immediately that you're ready to commit. When I was dating your mother, there were three other guys who were interested in her. I shut that down immediately."

I chuckle. "Yeah, we've heard the stories."

“Lock it down.” Dad gives me a pointed look. “She’s beautiful, she’s sweet, and your mother loves her already. What more do you want?”

I’m not sure what to say, so I simply nod.

Then Dad bursts into laughter. “Oh, *I* see what’s going on. You’re going to ‘let fate run its course’.”

“Pardon?”

“You’ll dance with her at the Christmas Eve Eve dance, and then your fate will be sealed. It’ll just be a matter of time.”

“You don’t actually believe that old superstition?”

“Damn right I do. I dragged your mother to that dance. Your grandfather dragged your grandmother to that dance. Christmas couples are magical couples, son. Don’t ever forget that.”

I look into the bakery, noticing that the edges of the window have been sprayed with fake snow. I can make out Sadie’s graceful figure as she takes photos of the cookies and desserts in the display case. Mom is deep in conversation with the counter lady, then they take Sadie into the back.

“Where are they going?” Dad asks, following my gaze.

“She needs a bunch of holiday photos for work,” I explain. “Maybe it’s behind the scenes shots of things fresh out of the oven or something.”

Mom returns with several large white boxes tied with string. “They’re letting her do a quick photo shoot for her website thingy. I do like how dedicated she is to her work.”

About ten minutes later, Sadie jumps beaming back into the Jeep. “They were so nice!” she enthuses as Dad starts to drive. “They were really excited to have their work on the app. I got incredible shots of perfect fresh cakes and cookies, some oven and bakery shots, and video clips of a girl making icing roses.”

“We’ve been customers of that bakery for years,” Mom says. “Always wonderful people working there. It’s lovely that you’re able to showcase their work.”

Sadie pulls a star-shaped sugar cookie wrapped in a napkin from her pocket. “And look! I got a free cookie because I’m new around here.” She breaks it into four pieces, sharing it around.

On the drive home, Mom points out the houses where my cousins Eric and Shawn live, less than a mile apart from each other, and very close to their parents, Uncle Steve and Aunt Stephanie. Dad goes on at length about the home renovations my cousins have both done since they’ve gotten married, and how well their careers are going.

Personally, I think they both have fine jobs, but they’re just cogs in the wheels of local companies. If it works for them, fine. Me, I prefer being my own boss over working for someone else’s dream. Plus, since I’m self-employed, I can give myself whatever sort of holiday bonus I like.

On the other hand, both of them have already found their niche, and have settled down. Careers, houses, wives. Eric is just a year older than me, and Shawn only a year younger, but I know in everyone’s eyes they’re the adults, and I’m the kid who hasn’t grown up yet.

I don’t know why, but that’s the only thing in the world that gets under my skin. Maybe because Dad was always trying to outdo his brother Steve in every way. Maybe it’s because I never played team sports, so I didn’t get that competitive urge out of my system.

With my business thriving and my home in order, I don’t want to think of Sadie as the final piece of the puzzle, but it’s hard not to.

If I can manage to turn this fake relationship real without overwhelming her, that is.

My parents’ house is pretty much unchanged, but I make the appropriate noises about their new dining room suite. Personally, I can’t tell one style of wooden furniture from the next, but this is from the new line of King’s Fine Furniture and apparently was a big deal to Mom. The King family has been in Holly Valley for ages, and I vaguely know the three brothers.

Sadie is taken with several details that make Mom completely light up. She doesn't just compliment something saying she likes it, she points out how it was a clever design choice due to... I've lost track. Whatever they're going on about.

Dad gives me one of his looks. "It's too early for a beer?"

"It's past noon, and I'm on vacation. I think it's okay." We sit in the kitchen and catch up on Dad's work, and chit chat about the neighbors.

Sadie pops her head in for just a second. "I'm going to process, style and load a mini-drop to the app. It'll take me about an hour."

"Cool. Have fun."

Mom returns after directing Sadie to the small room they've always grandly referred to as the study. "Why is the poor child working through the holidays?"

"Something about making an extra round of holiday graphics available for the diehard users," I shrug. "I think Sadie is trying to impress her boss."

"That's good." Dad peers out the window to the driveway, where Tara is getting out of Eric's truck. "People should be dedicated to their jobs. Hard work is important."

I smile to myself at Dad's thinly veiled dig at Tara. Both she and Amy quit their jobs the second they got engaged, moving in with their fiancés immediately. Meanwhile Mom kept on working at the bank when she and Dad were first married. She only switched to part time and covering holidays when my older brother came along, and still works at least a shift a week.

Dad playfully smacks Mom's butt when she bends over to pull a pan from the cupboard, and she pretends to be offended, making me crack up.

I've always hoped to find a woman who could truly be my partner in crime. Sharing both the boring daily things like cooking and cleaning, and the fun things like going to the movies, concerts, and vacations.

To find someone with whom I felt the spark and the chemistry to hold us together like super glue.

That kiss that Sadie and I accidentally shared at the airport was more than a spark. It was pure fireworks.

If my sweet girl was so totally overcome by the affection of my mother's hug, how is she going to react when I tell her about these real romantic feelings I have for her?

I don't know if Sadie is ready for a relationship. Hell, I don't know if I am myself.

But it's right there in front of us, and Dad's right. I can't take the slightest chance of losing her.

Even though it's a few days early, Sadie is the perfect Christmas gift that I would never have the nerve to have wished for.

In a quiet space with my headphones on so I can focus, it only takes around forty minutes to get the Holiday Sugar drop ready.

The bakers at Happy Home had been delighted to help. They were very patient as I art directed the shots, making sure the photos would turn out just right. I hope Parker will love them, and this will put me back in his good books.

After I get the files loading to the main server, I finally have a moment to think.

Josh has been beyond amazing. He understood immediately when I burst into tears, and covered for me. Suddenly having a mom for the holidays, even if she isn't mine, is a really big deal.

Plus, it happened right after that kiss.

That kiss.

I watch as the progress bar completes and blinks green. It was certainly a green light when Josh kissed me. Sure, it was clumsy at first, and it was only because I stupidly kicked over my suitcase, but... It was like he couldn't stop. As if he couldn't resist making the most of it, just in case it was his only chance.

That thrilled me to my core. *He wants me.* I can feel it in every breath, every touch. Should I try to create more opportunities to bring us together physically, playing my role of girlfriend to the hilt?

Closing down my laptop, I mentally review the family details before rejoining the others, trying to get them straight. Josh's cousin Eric and his wife Tara have been married for two years. Shawn and Amy have been married for one. Josh's older brother Dylan is single.

I've never been great at meeting lots of people at once, or being put on the spot during conversations with strangers. Although Josh hasn't exactly said it in so many words, I feel that he'd like me to talk about how successful his app is. Of course I researched it, so I'm ready.

Smoothing my hair, I take a few big breaths, then stow my laptop into my bag. For all of the awkwardness that might happen over the next few days, there are also going to be moments where Josh is holding my hand, or tucking me under his arm.

Worth it.

"Here she is," Josh says as I join everyone in the huge living room.

Since the rest of the seats are taken, he waves for me to sit beside him in the large easy chair, then he flips my legs over his so that we're snuggled together. "Family, this is Sadie. Sadie, this is the family."

I smile brightly, trying to stay calm even though everyone is clearly sizing me up. I place a finger to my lips, pretending to ponder when of course I totally looked everyone up online beforehand. "Let me guess..." I point to the far end of the closest sofa. "Eric and Tara?"

He smiles, but her eyes narrow slightly, even as her lips stretch into a smile.

"Amy and Shawn," I continue, gesturing to the other end of that sofa. "And you must be Josh's Uncle Steve and Aunt Stephanie?" I smile to the couple sitting beside his parents.

"She's good," Steve says with a grin.

Josh's parents laugh, and a thick arm tightens around me.

“So nice to meet you, Sadie,” Amy says. “They said that you were hiding away working. What do you do?”

I explain my job as succinctly as possible, telling her that I create themed content and photos for a productivity app that has been lucky enough to go viral over the past year.

“Oh my goodness!” Stephanie gushes. “I do charity work with a handful of women, and we just started using List-Go-Do to organize things. I love it!”

“Then you’ll see some wonderful photos soon.” Miriam’s eyes twinkle. “I’m probably not supposed to say anything, but there might be some photos of a certain bakery we all love on the app soon.”

Everyone but Tara seems amused. She looks irritated, and I don’t know why. Maybe she’s one of those people who always needs to be the center of attention.

“I love that sweater, Tara,” I say sweetly. “The blue really makes your silver jewelry pop.”

“Thank you. Eric spoils me rotten every time he gets promoted.” She turns to her husband. “Didn’t you say you were going to start giving your cousin some career advice?”

Josh’s entire body stiffens. I’ve never seen him so annoyed before.

Then he looks up at me in genuine surprise as I burst out laughing, turning back to his cousins. “I’ve been giving him career advice for a while now. Tips like ‘stop working so darn hard’. His app is selling like crazy, and the highest rated for sports and gym productivity, yet he’s still trying to improve things, and give large chains the personal touch as a thankyou for their business.”

Miriam’s eyes light up. “I thought this was just a part-time thing?”

“No, Mom. I’ve told you a few times now that coding and promoting this app is a real business.”

Mark chuckles. “Your mother is still limited to the weather app and the Holly Valley social events website. It’s a good

start, though.”

Her nose crinkles. “You know I’ve never liked computers. I’ve got the television for my shows and books on the shelf to read. That’s all I need.”

Everyone laughs, and then there’s a bumping sound from down the hall, as if something fell off a table. “Is someone else here?” I ask.

“That’s just Sharky,” Josh explains. “Mom’s cat doesn’t like anyone but her.”

Miriam holds out her wrist, showing off a fading scratch. “Some days she doesn’t like me, either.” She sighs, getting up to walk to the kitchen. “She always hides under our bed when people drop by. I hate serving her dinner in the bedroom, but she won’t eat at all otherwise.”

Everyone resumes chatting, and I turn to Josh. “Am I overstepping any boundaries if I try to make friends with the cat?” I whisper.

“Go ahead, but try not to get scratched.” His large palm runs up and down my spine, sending tingles through my lower belly. His lips nuzzle my ear. “You’re absolutely amazing, you know that? Everyone loves you already.”

My breath catches from the way his eyes glow. “I’ll just be a few minutes,” I whisper back, then impulsively brush my lips over his forehead in a soft kiss that feels completely real and natural.

There’s no mistaking the electricity between us. Yet it feels like we’re both holding back. No wonder, in this strange situation.

As I climb out of Josh’s lap, my hip brushes across the front of his jeans, causing a shiver to run through both of us. My eyes drop, unable to meet his gaze as I hurry away.

It takes five solid minutes of sitting in the hallway running my fingernails against the edge of the cat food dish, but eventually a fluffy gray face peeks out of the room.

A few minutes later, she's licking the plate clean, arching her back up luxuriously as I pet her.

"Well, would you look at that?" Miriam pokes her head out of the kitchen doorway to peer down the hall at us. "She must love your energy, Sadie."

After giving Sharky a good scratch around the ears, then another above her tail, I head into the kitchen to help Miriam with the big family dinner.

So far so good, I think. Nobody is questioning our relationship, I've already pointed out how successful Josh is, and the holiday festivities seem to be going well.

It's getting harder to focus when every atom of my body is begging to be closer to Josh, though. It's like there's a magnetic field around the two of us, pulling us toward each other.

Surprisingly, I'm not nervous that things are progressing so quickly. Yet I still have no idea about the sleeping arrangements tonight.

Those are definitely going to be...*interesting*.

Sadie knows exactly how to make my mother love her, even though she's not really trying. She probably just wanted to get out of a crowded living room for a minute, so she went to play with the cat. And she probably started helping Mom in the kitchen simply because in her mind that's what guests do.

At every other large dinner or house party I've been to, all of the women at least offer to help, and end up in the kitchen at some point. Some of the men too, though sometimes we're intimidated because cooks can get territorial.

That said, I don't think I've ever seen Tara offer to help Mom with anything. And Amy copies her every move, so that excludes her as well.

By the time dinner is finished, the group has covered every topic of conversation, from careers to homes to what's new in town to teasing about Christmas gifts. Tara is clearly grilling Sadie every chance she gets, but Mom and Dad are already running interference, which I appreciate.

Sadie turns to me with a smile and whispers, "It's so nice that your family has this pre-holiday dinner every year."

Slipping an arm around her narrow shoulders, I hug her close and murmur, "This isn't a tradition. I'm pretty sure this is just so that everyone can get to know you." Her eyes grow wide. "Don't worry about it." I kiss the tip of her nose. "I'm going to get us out of here in a few minutes."

Once everyone has had as much coffee, cake, and cookies as they can handle, I follow Mom to the kitchen with an armload of dishes.

“I hate to eat and run, but Sadie hasn’t seen the Walk of Lights yet, and she needs to take photos of it.”

Mom beams. “I’m so glad they’re having it for several days now, instead of just one night. See? Progress even finds us here in Holly Valley.” She laughs. “Go. Have fun. Oh, and you two can have the green room downstairs while you’re here.”

“Thanks, Mom.” We haul our luggage downstairs to the spare bedroom, and Sadie changes into some warmer clothing. Then we say our goodbyes.

“You’ve got your camera?” I ask as we’re tugging on our boots.

“Yeah. Where are we going?”

“Secret and important Holly Valley tradition. All I’ll say is you’ll get a ton of photos.”

Her eyes sparkle. “Have I ever told you that I’m terrible with secrets?”

“We’re going somewhere in town to walk around and take photos. That’s more than enough information for my sweet, snow bunny girlfriend.”

She giggles. “Whatever you say, instant boyfriend.”

Grabbing the keys to Dad’s Jeep, I see Tara coming out of the bathroom, and hope she didn’t overhear that.

I knew that Sadie would be dazzled by the Walk of Lights, but I hadn’t anticipated running into so many old friends. It’s tricky to juggle greetings while keeping a hand on Sadie’s shoulder as she takes photos of the endless decorations.

Sneaking peeks at her camera screen, I notice that she crops and angles her shots in an interesting way. She doesn’t capture the entire view, she zooms in on a delicate detail, like three lights sparkling against the snow with a couple of pine needles sticking out.

I love that she's so creative and dedicated to her work. I especially love the way she keeps leaning into me for support as she lines up a shot. I've given up trying to keep my hands off her, locking an arm around her waist or nuzzling her hair every chance I get.

Finally, we reach the gigantic Christmas tree at the back of the park. "This is wild," Sadie breathes. "Is it possible for a tree to be too big?"

This year's tree looks to be about two stories tall. The huge star at the top glows, flickering amber and gold, and the rest of the tree is covered in hundreds of clear, round ornaments.

Sadie squints. "What's inside the ornaments? It looks like slips of paper."

"Exactly. This is where we write our Christmas wishes."

Taking her hand, we walk to the large table at the side, where an older gentleman smiles warmly as soon as he sees me. "Good to see you made it home, Josh."

"Thanks. Sadie, this is Mr. Douglas. He keeps an eye on the tree every year for us."

He smiles broadly, shaking her hand. "I heard that Josh finally had a serious girlfriend, but nobody said that you're as cute as a ladybug." She giggles sweetly.

We show Sadie the strips of paper where everyone writes down their Christmas wishes before twisting them up and jamming them into an ornament. She thinks for a long time before printing something with a gold pen.

I, however, immediately scribble down the thought that has been haunting me since we first kissed.

Please let Sadie fall for me, so that this can be the start of a real relationship. Hopefully, one that lasts forever.

"Okay then Sadie, we'll put yours closer to the top. Josh, you know the drill."

We guide her toward a cherry picker. "You can't be serious?"

“Don’t worry, you’re only going up around twenty feet. I haven’t lost a wisher yet,” Mr. Douglas chuckles.

Sadie is definitely jumpy as she steps in with me. Then my arms lock around her waist, pulling her back against my chest.

There it is again. That connection. That spark. That burning, twisting feeling through my body that makes me want to get much closer to this gorgeous girl.

I want her.

The thought washes over me, leaving my stomach on the ground as we rise shakily into the air. The fragrance of the pine tree is fresh and cool, while her soft, feminine scent is warm.

Turning slightly to look up at me, her beautiful eyes are huge. “Are you scared?” I ask.

“Not with you here.”

The machine jiggles a bit as we stop. My arms remain clamped around her waist. “Reach out and hang yours first.”

It feels like she trusts me already. Good. I want to be the steadiest male figure in her life. Her rock.

Her arm stretches out to catch the hook of the ornament on a branch, as my lips softly graze her ear. “You can’t tell me your Christmas wish or it won’t come true. But just tell me... Was it a fake one, or a real one?”

Turning carefully in my arms, her lovely face tilts up to catch me staring at her mouth. Maybe it’s the adrenaline of being up so high that makes her saucy. “You go first – fake or real?”

I bring our lips together very slowly, moving cautiously in case she backs away. With one hand securely on the metal railing, the other moves from her waist so I can brush my palm against her cheek.

Tiny golden Christmas lights reflect in her eyes as my head dips the final inch before my mouth presses to hers, the intensity of the kiss instantly spiraling. Everything about the way we connect is perfect. Gentle at first, then, deeper,

stronger, my hand tightening around her as she presses her entire body against me.

“Sadie,” I groan. “You’re driving me crazy.” Our lips part, delving deeper as we clutch each other tighter. My head swims from realizing how much she wants me too.

“I’m afraid I can only look away politely for another ten seconds,” Mr. Douglas calls up from below. “Then I’m going to have to bring you two back down to Earth, like it or not. We’ve got a lineup here, you know.”

We both sputter a laugh, then I reach out to hang my ornament on the same branch as Sadie’s. As we begin to descend, I tip her face up to mine. “I want to believe that we have the same wish, my Christmas angel.”

Our fingers thread together as we step off the cherry picker. Mr. Douglas gives us a wink. “I saw nothing, I say nothing,” he chuckles.

We continue walking through the park, and Sadie takes more photos of the Christmas lights and illuminated holiday art installations. When she put the lens cap back on, I ask, “Enough photos for one day?”

“Yeah. I’ll be able to do another mini drop tomorrow, and hopefully Parker will forgive my previous less than stellar set.”

I pull her between some trees, shielding us from the people milling around. “It makes sense that you didn’t have the holiday spirit before, since you haven’t had a good holiday in a long time.” My fingers slip casually through her soft hair, brushing it from her eyes. “I’ve never thought of myself as the white knight type. Wanting to ride in on horseback and right every wrong in the world. Save the damsel, protect the maiden.” My lips drift across her forehead. “But suddenly that’s all I can think about. Making you happy. Giving you a huge, wonderful Christmas that you’ll never forget. Giving you all of the care and attention that you deserve.”

She freezes silently for a moment. Then she nods, lips parting as she stretches up and we sink into another deep,

dreamy kiss.

It's just dark enough that there's the illusion of privacy. I unzip her coat, my hands gliding up her back. "Tell me you want me," I murmur as my fingers slip into the back of her hair, tilting her mouth to mine. "Tell me this is more than for show. That whatever this is between us is real."

She pauses, making my heart stop beating before she finally whispers, "Yes."

My thumb glides along her cheekbone. "You look like an angel in the snow."

She grins up at me. "I can't believe that I'm still toasty warm after being outside for so long. I've never had such a super industrial strength winter coat and boots before."

The beating of my heart settles into a deep, serious thump. Now that I have far more money than I will ever need, it will be no trouble at all to spoil Sadie senseless. It will be so easy to make her life as stress-free as possible.

I want to make her mine. To care for her. To have her come to me whenever she needs anything.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm kissing her again. It's a bit too hard, a bit too rough. Yet I can't stop, especially when she grips the back of my shoulders, pulling us close, encouraging me.

"I should get you home," I murmur when I'm finally able to tear myself away.

Sadie's eyes glow in the lights of the tree closest to us. "Your parents really are okay with us sharing a bed?"

"There's a couch in that room. If you want, I'm happy to stay there instead."

She bites her lip for a moment, then shakes her head. "I think... I mean, it would look really weird if we were caught."

"So you want to keep up pretenses?" My eyebrow raises.

She laughs. "No. I mean, yes. But mostly..." She pauses, blushing faintly.

I whisper against her ear, “You want me to snuggle you all night long, don’t you?”

I expect her to laugh, or make another joke.

Instead, Sadie nods quite seriously. “Yeah. I do.”

My mind is spinning as we return to the Cutlers' house. Everything has been happening so fast with Josh that I haven't even had a moment to think.

And now we're going to be sleeping in the same bed?

I don't know what's normal in the dating world, since I've never dated. The only advice I've ever heard that really makes sense is to trust your gut. Well, my gut already trusts Josh implicitly. Maybe that's a little hasty, since we've only known each other for a few days. But we've been talking about so many things, for long stretches of time, and it feels like we're on the same page about everything.

Honestly, I've never been this close with anyone. Maybe because I keep to myself, maybe because I've never clicked with the right person.

Or... I don't even want to think about it, but honestly, it's the truth... I've never really been able to trust anyone before.

We pull into the driveway, and as soon as Josh parks, he squeezes my hand. "My parents are probably in bed by now. Mom always reads for a few hours before she goes to sleep, and Dad does his puzzles and crosswords. So we pretty much have the place to ourselves."

"Okay."

He walks around the Jeep to open my door. As he helps me down, his thick arm slips around my waist, pulling me close. "I promise I won't be offended if you'd honestly rather I sleep

on the couch. This is a lot of steps very quickly, and we don't even know what we really are yet."

His eyes are a deeper, almost woodsy green in the near dark. As I stare into them, all I can think of is that I want more. More of him, more of this closeness, more of... everything.

"Sharing is supposed to bring people closer, right?" I asked softly. "So maybe sharing a bed, and sharing a close space will... I don't know. But do you know what I mean?"

He nods with a wide grin. "Words are failing me, too. But I think I get you."

We walk into the house and quietly tiptoe downstairs to the lovely green bedroom guest suite. I change into a baggy t-shirt and sleep shorts in the washroom, then wash my face and brush my teeth. When I come out, Josh is wearing a snug navy tank top and black boxer briefs.

Even though he's wearing more than he would be at the beach or the pool, I'm looking at a lot of tanned skin. It's hard to keep my mouth closed as I stare at the dips and curves of his muscles, at his thick arms and sculpted thighs.

He pretends not to notice as he turns off the overhead lights, leaving just the bedside lamp on. I slip under the covers beside him, and he makes a big show of fluffing up my pillow for me.

"Thank you for whisking me away to such a Christmas wonderland," I say softly. "This has already been the best holiday ever."

Josh lies down on his side of the bed, close enough to the center that it's clear he's leaving it up to me just how close we should get. His thoughtfulness puts me a little more at ease.

I slide over so that we're face to face, our knees touching. His arm slips under the pillow to lift it so that my head is cradled. His huge, muscular body feels warm, and the heat emanates in waves across the minimal space between us, sending electric sparks through my core.

I want him. I've never wanted anything for myself before, above the bare necessities. Every time Josh touches me, it feels decadent. As if I'm being greedy for wanting pleasure simply for pleasure's sake.

There are so many things that I've always wondered and been curious about when it comes to sex. And I'm lying right next to a man who is the perfect choice to experience everything with for the very first time.

"Are you tired after the flight?" he asks softly.

"A bit. Plus, you know...Ultimate Christmas overload. How did your mom put it? Having Christmas cheer shoved up your butt the second you walk in?"

Josh laughs quietly. "Yeah. You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but it's still a bit of a surprise every time." He hesitates. "Sadie, does it bother you that I'm quite a bit older than you?"

"No." My hand gravitates to the center of his chest and slowly traces a circle over his heart. "I like that you're older. Stable. Steady. I dunno, I've never felt like I really knew what was going on, and it seems like you do."

His chuckle rumbles through his thick, solid chest. "Don't think for a second that extra years ensures people have it together. I mean, I kind of do. I own a car and a house, and I somehow pulled a new career out of thin air when the old one wasn't working anymore."

"You know who you are and what you want. I admire that."

"I'm looking forward to every single day that I'll get to know more about you." His dark whisper is so sexy, especially when his arm shifts out from under the pillow, cradling my shoulders, and stroking my arm with his fingertips. His other hand reaches out slowly to settle on my hip, his fingers splaying across my waist.

Our bodies are unconsciously shifting closer and closer with every breath. "Sadie," he whispers, "should I let you go to sleep? Or..."

As the word trails off, I can feel the sensual urges rolling off him in hot waves. His body wants mine. It's something I've never imagined.

Feeling wanted is something I've always craved, yet I've never really thought about it on a physical level. It's instantly addictive, drawing me in and stopping my logic, my breath, changing the very fiber of what I've always thought about myself.

My usual shyness be damned. I need this man to touch me any way he likes.

“Um, if we're supposed to be a couple who have been together for around four months, what should we be doing right now?”

His palm slips up my waist, trailing along the side of my breast, up my throat, to cup my cheek.

“Sadie, you're completely in charge. Always. But to be honest, it's been hell keeping my hands off of you from the second we met.”

“Really?”

“Really. You were so nervous in the diner, and your hands were fluttering. I wanted to hold them so badly. Wanted to kiss those perfect lips. Hear every soft breath.”

My heart is thumping, the pressure in my chest creating a reverberation with each beat. “I'm sure it can't be healthy, holding all that back. Maybe you should just...do anything you want.”

A choked gasp fills my throat as Josh suddenly yanks my body against his, kissing me hard and deep with a heat so intense it feels almost dangerous.

With the entire length of his body pressed against mine, there's no hiding the fact that he's extremely aroused. I moan from the feel of his hot, hard length against me, and his tongue tangles with mine, fingers gripping the back of my hair and tilting my head to deepen the kiss.

My hands have suddenly forgotten how to be shy as they roam across his chest, his rippled abs, and move around his sides to caress his back. Through his thin tank top, I can feel every dip and swell of his body.

I utter a strange, shaky groan as his huge palm cups my breast, testing how much pressure is right for me. When his thumb brushes across my nipple, I realize that his hand has slipped under my shirt, and the skin on skin contact makes my head swim.

“So sexy,” Josh murmurs against my lips. “Every part of you. Every inch of you.”

“You’re like a soft brick wall,” I laugh, pushing up his shirt to caress the wide planes of his chest.

His thumb swirls slowly over my nipple again, making me shudder. Then he pulls away to look deep into my eyes. “Sadie, tell me that I can touch you everywhere.” The dark, gritty tone of his voice almost makes it a command.

“Yes,” I manage to breathe. “Do anything you want.”

I’ve always fought so hard to be independent, but I never realized it also feels incredible to surrender to someone. Josh knows exactly where I need to be touched, his hands slowly pushing up my shirt.

His eyes light up as his tongue slowly drags around my nipple, his strong fingers caressing my skin along the underside of my breasts until I’m quivering against him.

Am I actually ready to let him do anything? *Everything?* I think so.

Another moan escapes my throat that almost sounds like I’m in pain. Yet Josh already knows what kind of ache I’m feeling.

“Easy, baby,” he murmurs. “Just relax.”

Sure, like that’s going to happen. His hand skims down my stomach to slip into my shorts. My legs part automatically, inviting him in.

I'm not surprised that he touches me so tenderly. Every gentle caress of his thick, blunt fingers makes my pulse race. There's already a deep pressure gathering in my lower belly. Like something is getting ready to explode.

His teeth graze lightly across my sensitive nipple, then he groans. "You're so wet, baby." The mischievous look in his eyes tells me that he loves the way my body is reacting to him.

After kissing and licking my other breast for a moment, Josh brings his lips to mine. It almost feels like he's playing detective. Trying to learn what pressure, what speed, exactly what kind of friction my body craves as his fingers skim through my crease and across my throbbing button.

"That's it." His voice is becoming rough. "Let me feel you come, gorgeous. Let it all out."

This is so intense. My breath mingling with his. His hand cupping my most intimate skin. The way he knows what my body craves even before I do. Gasping against his mouth, my fingers tighten in his hair and grip the back of his shoulder as I tense up.

"Yeah," he mutters. "That's it. Give it to me, baby."

My lips fall open with a ragged cry as he swallows my screams, kissing me feverishly as he strokes me faster, harder. "Yes... Josh..." I cry out weakly as my belly quivers and hips shift, my entire body needing to press against him.

As I start to come back to Earth, Josh shifts, taking away the intimate pressure of his shorts against my hip. "*That* is for another time," he chuckles, his eyes blazing. "You know how much I want you, Sadie. But everything's happening so fast, we should probably wait just a bit more."

My palm shakes his shoulder slightly. "Well look at you, being the bossy grown-up."

He laughs, then my mouth falls open in shock as he brings his fingers up to his mouth, licking them clean. "You're delicious. I knew you would be."

"I..."

Josh laughs again. “I wish you could see how beautiful you are right now. Flushed, and a little rumped.”

He smooths my hair, pulls my shirt back into place, then cuddles me in his arms as if nothing just happened.

My head is spinning. That was so intense. And I didn’t have a single qualm about letting him take control of me. I guess I don’t have to fight to be independent if I’m with someone who’s on the same team as me. Someone who thinks of me as a partner, not a burden. He wasn’t saddled with me. I’m not his responsibility. He has chosen to be with me.

I can’t believe that our spur of the moment fake relationship might actually have a possibility of becoming real.

Even though a little voice in the back of my head whispers that I should know better than to get my hopes up.

JOSH

Last night was the most incredible experience of my life. I will never forget Sadie's breathy noises, and the way she clung to me as she came. The sensation of my gorgeous girl's soft body snug against mine was a thrill that I hope to repeat every night forever.

But we still haven't been clear about where this relationship might even be going. Sure, we're having a great time here in Holly Valley. Yet the holidays won't last forever. Will we still fit together back in the real world?

I'm a bit nervous to ask yet. Scaring her off is the last thing I want to do. I need a clear sign first, I think.

I'm grateful Sadie seems fairly comfortable in this odd situation. As an only child raised by two uncles who didn't seem to give a damn, she could have become extremely introverted.

I can tell that she's quiet, and a bit shy. But she's managing to be more outgoing around my slightly rowdy family.

Now that my mostly silent brother Dylan has joined us, my parent's house is jam packed with people, with Eric and Tara, and Shawn and Amy joining us for lunch. The house being so full of family is making Mom grin from ear to ear as she tries to overfeed everyone.

I'm not a fan of the way Tara is analyzing Sadie's every move. I don't know my cousin's new wife very well, but she seems to always focus on hierarchy. Who is the most attractive woman in the room, who has known who the longest, whose

family history goes back the furthest. It's as if she's studying for a test.

It's clearly making Sadie jumpy, so I do my best to play referee until it's time to get ready for the Christmas Eve Eve Ball. Down in the guest room, Sadie dresses in the bathroom, leaving the door cracked open an inch so that we can talk.

"So, this ball – it's just a big holiday shindig?" she calls out.

"Sort of. It's also kind of an unofficial annual town reunion. Like a homecoming. No matter where people end up, everyone comes back here for Christmas."

"That's so sweet." Her voice is soft. Then there's a long sigh. "Well, I guess this is as fancy as I'm going to get."

Sadie steps out in the purple dress and silver shoes, looking like a goddess. She giggles as my mouth falls open while I clutch my heart, collapsing heavily on the bed. "Damn, girl. You need to come with a warning label. I'm not used to this much beauty all at once."

Her lips curl up in a saucy grin, and her eyes wander appreciatively over my best suit. "You found a tie that matches my dress!"

"Charlene grabbed it for me." The way her gaze drifts across my shoulders, it's clear that Sadie likes that I'm so big, and the way I fill out this jacket. I'm used to women checking me out now and then, but this girl's approval is now the most important thing in the world to me.

Dad took the Jeep to get there early, so I take Mom's car, and when we arrive the party is already in full swing. The second we get through the door, my parents' friends practically pounce on us, all demanding to meet my lovely girlfriend.

Sadie is a trooper – shaking hands, making small talk, and brushing off the inevitable "So when are *you* getting married?" questions from every well-meaning woman.

When we're finally able to extricate ourselves we go get some punch, then finish our drinks quickly so I can follow her

around, carrying her gear bag as she takes close up photos of the decor. She doesn't have a preference for the homemade or professional decorations, looking only for color and light, and the shapes themselves.

Once she packs the camera away, I lead her to a quiet corner. Sadie whispers, "What was that...I think it was Mary going on about...something about dancing here and finding true love?"

"That was Mary King, the matriarch of the King family, as in King's Fine Furniture, as in my parents' new dining room suite. She met her husband Nicolas at this ball, way back when. A bunch of the local ladies are totally convinced that at least one couple gets together here every year, starting off their happy ever afters of magic and romance together." He smiles. "Okay, my dad might believe it, too."

Her blue eyes stare at me appraisingly. "So, is it the event itself that creates this so-called magic? Or is it a timing thing, like do you have to be dancing or kissing when the clock strikes midnight or whatever?"

I stroke an imaginary beard thoughtfully. "I think it's more a chemical reaction? The friction of the old oak flooring creating some sort of woody gas, mixed with the residual road salt on our shoes?"

Sadie snaps her fingers. "That's it! Plus whatever herbs are in that life-warping potato salad."

The way she smiles up at me makes my heart feel like it's actually growing in my chest. "Life *changing*. Speaking of which, you ready to have your life changed?"

"You know it."

We move to the buffet table, and once we each have a small dish in front of us, I watch as Sadie takes her first bite. She freezes, then stares into space, blinking. "Holy..." She chews slowly, swallowing before looking at me wide-eyed. "All potato salad is pretty darn good. But this. This is... There aren't even words."

"Nope."

We eat in silence that is broken only by the waves of laughter from people around us, and the soft sound of Sadie moaning in potato salad-induced bliss. I love the way her eyes glow when she's happy and satisfied. What is her lovely face going to look like when we really sleep together?

My imagination is already running wild, picturing her flushed cheeks, her wild eyes. Thinking about the sound of her breathless moans. The feel of her fingers digging into my skin. Her body clutching mine, knowing that I won't stop until I've given her everything she needs.

I have to stop that train of thought immediately. One, because I'm determined to take my time with Sadie. Two, because it will be impossible for me to walk without the entire town noticing how much she turns me on.

We wash down the potato salad with another glass of punch, then I ask, "Ready to brave the legendary holiday dancing?"

"I'd love to."

Her fingers thread through mine as we walk to the dance floor, and everything clicks into place. A spot in the center opens up, and we sneak in before being surrounded by other couples and the ever-present photographer. The band starts playing an ancient Christmas carol I don't even remember the name of.

Sadie's graceful, curvy body fits against mine perfectly, as if we were puzzle pieces designed for each other. People are swaying all around us, but we're in our own little bubble.

"Would I be a terrible man if I kissed you right now?" I murmur near her ear.

Sadie's nose crinkles slightly as she grins. "Lip gloss, buddy."

My eyes roll so dramatically she laughs. "Sorry. I'm not accustomed to the rules of makeup."

Her fingers reach up and walk along the space between the top of my collar and the bottom of my hair. "There's a lot of things that I'm not accustomed to," she says softly.

“Same.” My lips brush along the top of her hair as we drift in a slow circle. “There are so many things I want to say to you, but it’s always not a good time, or there are people around, or it’s way too soon.”

“Yeah.” Her lovely eyes glow as she looks up at me. “And yet... Even though there’s a bunch of things that we’re not saying, I want to think that we’re not saying the same things?”

My arm tightens around her as the song picks up a bit, our bodies swaying together as the warmth between us grows. “I think given the accelerated time frame, and complete lack of preparation, we’re doing extremely well.”

I want to pull her against me, but the photographer is lurking. Turning her in a slow circle, we smile for the camera. The second he’s gone, she turns too quickly, stepping on my toe.

“That’s it,” I moan. “My dancing career is officially over, and we haven’t even triggered all of that Christmas magic.”

Sadie’s head falls back and she bursts out laughing just as the song is ending. “We’re absolutely terrible at this fake relationship stuff!”

Then her gaze darts over my shoulder and she makes a tiny squeak.

I spin just in time to catch Tara smirking right next to us. “I knew it!” She smacks Eric on the arm. “*Nobody* is that perfect together after only a few months. He must have hired her from some agency.”

She grabs her husband’s hand, threading her way through the crowd and making a beeline straight for my parents.

Sadie’s face falls, her body sagging as I lock an arm around her. Guiding her back to the food table, I try to smile. “Relax. Mom doesn’t like Tara. She probably won’t listen to a word she says.”

Sad blue eyes look up at me. “Tara already didn’t like me. I’m so sorry. I’ve... I’ve ruined everything.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“I—”

“Josh!”

Looking up, Dylan is beckoning me to the bar, where Dad is waiting. I wave that I’ll be right there.

“Sorry, it’s the holiday scotch-with-the-menfolk thing. I’ll be back in five minutes. Will you be okay here? Maybe have some more potato salad?”

She smiles politely, but it’s clearly forced. “Of course. I’m fine.”

I don’t believe her for a second, and can’t stand to leave when she’s upset. But she’s insistent, pushing my shoulder. “Go. Have your ceremonial manly drink. I’ll lurk and take more photos or something.”

“See you in a bit, gorgeous girlfriend.”

Sadie doesn’t respond, simply nodding.

Holding her face between my palms, I want to kiss her despite her worries about the lip gloss. Want to tell her that I’ll miss her, even though I’ll only be gone for five minutes. Want to tell her that I’ll stick up for her no matter what crap Tara tries to spread.

My lips brush her forehead.

Walking away, it feels like every step is in the wrong direction.

I truly need to tell her how I feel before we’re apart again, since I’m afraid that Sadie isn’t ready to fully trust in us yet.

SADIE

Everything is too bright and loud and my body feels hollow. If I've embarrassed Josh in front of his family and the entire town, I...I don't know...

There aren't even words.

I already feel incredibly guilty for him spending a fortune on my clothes and the flight. It's not the same cold dread that crawled through my bones every time my uncles had to provide for me, but I certainly didn't feel very independent not having basic winter gear.

Checking my phone, I see a text from Parker saying that the team is looking forward to my next drop. Apparently all the other productivity apps are on a skeleton crew over the holidays, and here we are with fresh content all the way to New Year's.

Crap. Did I overpromise how much I could send him during the holidays? What if the latest round of photos isn't as good?

This isn't the sort of event where anyone is on their phone, so I go to the ladies room, setting my gear bag on the counter in the makeup alcove. I send Patrick a text that I'll send another photo set as soon as possible.

Thumbing through my messages, a heaviness settles over me. How can I possibly repay Josh for everything? All he seems to want is a mellow holiday, while keeping his family from analyzing him too much. So far it feels like my presence has brought a lot more attention instead of less.

On the other hand, they're also starting to understand his career, at least I think his Mom is.

But making sure nobody finds out that our relationship is closer to four days old than four months is crucial. It doesn't matter what they think of me, as long as nobody thinks less of Josh. He's the sweetest, funniest, most incredible man I've ever met.

"Can you believe Josh is with that stuck up bitch?"

I cringe as Tara's sharp voice echoes from within one of the bathroom stalls just around the corner.

"Aww, she's not so bad. Lots of people are obsessed with work these days."

That sounds like Amy. I slip my phone into my purse and silently lift my camera bag, hoping to escape undetected.

"That's not what I'm talking about." Hovering near the door, I can't resist listening. "She was dancing with her hands all over Josh, then she says something about them being in a fake relationship."

There's a flush, then running water, and both voices are clearer.

"Maybe she was joking," Amy says. "Why would Josh bring a fake girlfriend home?"

"To show off to his family. Or maybe he's jealous of Eric and Shawn for getting married when he isn't even dating." There's a snort. "There's absolutely nothing about them together online. Seriously, I'll bet he paid her. She's probably a hooker. Sorry...*hired escort*."

"Tara! Don't say that." Wow, I've never heard Amy talk back to her before.

"Why not? It's probably true. Nobody knows where Josh gets his money or even what he does for a living. He doesn't come back here very often. It's like he's ashamed of his life or something. It makes total sense that he would hire a hooker to play his girlfriend and make him look wholesome."

"Are you drunk? That is insane."

“Come on. Have you seen her? She’s way too much of a glamazon to be some photographer. I’m going to go tell Miriam once she’s done talking to the mayor.”

“Don’t you—”

I barely escape in time, dashing out the door before they come around the corner. It’s hard to walk quickly in these heels, but I slip down the hallway toward the bar as fast as I can.

What am I going to say to Josh? Miriam is all about family, and Tara and Amy have married into it, so they’re solid. I’m just some random girlfriend. Some girl who was in a diner and got caught up in a bizarre set of circumstances.

Everyone is about to find out that I’m a fake girlfriend.

Josh is going to be mortified.

It’s all my fault. How could I have let that slip?

Skulking around the edge of the enormous ballroom, couples and families are all having a wonderful time. I can see a strong family resemblance in some groups. A cluster of blonde-haired, blue-eyed people. A group of tall men with thick, dark curly hair that are clearly brothers. A group of petite brunette girls who are either sisters or cousins.

Everyone here is related, either by blood or by marriage. They all grew up in this town together.

Except me.

An odd chill runs up my spine. I’m not just an outsider. Someone like me genuinely doesn’t fit in here.

I have no connection to this town anymore, since I have no family left here. No friends, nothing to tie me to this place.

I must have been crazy to think that visiting this town might bring back some happy old memories, or make me feel grounded. Because I’m *not* grounded. I’m an orphan. A loner. Rudderless. Even my work is virtual, without a physical office.

I'm sure Josh meant well when he sweetly thought that we could help each other out over the holidays. Problem was, he was thinking with his heart instead of his head.

Now, thanks to me, he's going to be shamed, or made a laughing stock, or both. All because I messed up.

Well, it sounds like people don't think I'm right for him anyway.

There's an empty chair by itself in the corner, so I sit with my bag on my lap, trying to figure out what I should do.

Josh looks like he's having a wonderful time at the bar with his father and brother, as they order another round, laughing uproariously about something.

Then his eyes scan the room until he finds me. I give him a thumbs up and wave, as if to say, "Go on, don't worry about me."

He blows me a kiss, which gets him an approving elbow in the ribs from his brother. It seems like Dylan lightens up once he's had a bit of scotch. Maybe it's reminiscing with family, surrounded by an entire town of people who have known him forever. Must be nice.

Glancing around the room, I'm not sure, but it feels like a few women are giving me strange looks. Tara and Amy both have glasses of punch in their hands as they walk around from group to group. Every time they chat briefly with someone, then move away, that person glares at me and shakes their head.

Oh, crap. It's already started.

Time for the fake girlfriend to fake being brave.

Walking toward Miriam, I pass a cluster of ladies her age. One of them in a bright green dress has her back to me and is talking as I go by. "Some kind of phony girlfriend, you say? And yet they're sleeping together at his parents' house? That is so inappropriate. Poor Miriam – I'm sure she had no idea."

When I finally get closer to Josh's mother, Tara steps in front of me to block my path.

“I don’t know what your intentions are,” she huffs. “But the Cutler family is well respected in this town, and has been for many generations.”

“I don’t want to do anything that—”

“I looked you up,” Tara snaps. “Or at least, I tried to. There’s nothing about you online anywhere. Nothing at all. Is that why you’re trying to worm your way into this family?”

“I’m not—”

“Amy and I put in the effort,” she hisses. “We did the research, found good men, dated them for a long time before meeting their parents. Dating, acceptance by everyone, then proposals and marriage. It’s the process. And here you’re just parachuting in and pretending to be his date. Why – for a free trip to town? Or to do research for your little...website thing? Which isn’t even that great an app, by the way. Stupid thing is way too complicated.”

I stay silent, assuming that anything I say will be used against me.

“See? She doesn’t even try to deny it,” Tara laughs with Amy. “Just a garden variety gold digger.”

Sound distorts and the crowd feels like it’s closing in on me as they flounce away. Miriam and Mark are walking toward a group of gentlemen in tuxedos that look like the Mayor and town councilors or something. Some of the other women are giving me sideways glares, staying well away from me.

What should I do?

At a busy party like this, people tend to focus on what’s right in front of them. Food, music, friends. If I disappear from sight, that could be the best way for the gossip to stop. Or at least slow down.

I race toward the entrance, grabbing my coat from the rack by the door and throwing it on as I step out into the chilly night. Most of the sidewalks have been cleared, but I won’t be able to get very far in these heels.

A braver girl would stay and tell Josh what happened in the ladies' room, even though I don't understand why Tara hates me so much, or why she seems personally offended by the idea that our relationship might not be real.

I should be strong enough to face the scrutiny of strangers that I probably won't ever see again. But I'm not.

Trudging down the street, I spot the distant sign of a coffee shop. Hopefully I can sit in the back and do some work. My toes are already freezing, and my gear bag feels like it's filled with rocks.

Maybe by the time I've had a coffee, I'll figure out a way to explain to Josh that he needs a girl who fits better into his family. Someone with a history that he can be proud of.

A girl who is more than a scared little orphan nobody who is terrified of losing her job.

That's terrible enough. But faced with the thought of losing Josh... My mind blanks with horror.

I wanted so much to be his girl. To feel safe and loved and wanted.

But I know now that was just a holiday fantasy.

It's never going to happen.

JOSH

Halfway through my second scotch and midway through a detailed discussion of Dylan's new life in the mountains, I look around to see that Sadie is gone. She probably went to go say hi to someone.

A few minutes later, I still can't see her anywhere, so I send a quick text.

Me: Hey – I'd love to dance with you again. Where did you go?

When she doesn't respond, a cold weight settles in my stomach. "I can't find Sadie," I tell Dad. "Do you see where Mom went?"

He points to a group of ladies in the far corner. "She's over there. Don't see Sadie, though."

Dylan peers around the room. "Would she go out front for fresh air or something?"

"In this cold? Doubt it."

My phone buzzes, and I'm relieved that it's her. Then I read the message.

Sadie: Please have a great rest of the night. I left to get some work done. Hopefully with me gone, the gossip will die down.

I blink at my phone.

Me: What gossip?

Sadie: I'm so sorry.

Somehow, even over text I can sense that Sadie is overwhelmed.

As soon as I approach Mom, she takes my elbow and leads me out to the hallway. Taking a deep breath and looking around cautiously, she plasters on the smile that she only uses when she's extremely stressed. "You know I love your cousin Eric. But good Lord, that woman he married. What the hell is wrong with her?"

The cold sensation in my stomach turns to jagged ice. "What's Tara done this time?"

"She's waltzing around spreading a ridiculous rumor to anyone who will listen. Telling people that Sadie is only after your money, because you're as successful as Eric and Shawn."

Pausing, I take a slow breath, then lean in to whisper. "I've never talked to Sadie about money. Tara often brags about how much Eric makes, but between you and me, I've made more than his annual salary in just the past four months. But Sadie knows nothing about any of that."

Mom's mouth falls open as she blinks in surprise. Then she shrieks, squeezing my arm. "Josh, honey, that's wonderful! Just because I don't understand what you do with those computer things doesn't mean that I'm not proud of all of your hard work."

"I know. Thanks."

"But that Tara." She scowls and shakes her head. "She's also telling people that your relationship isn't real. That she's your fake girlfriend or some hired – well, that part's not worth repeating. None of it made any sense. I swear, that girl has gone off her rocker."

Looking into the eyes of the woman who knows me better than anyone, I realize I can't lie to her. "Mom... Sadie and I just met a few days ago. She didn't have anywhere to go for Christmas, and I thought if I brought a girlfriend home for the holidays, it would stop everyone from giving me those pitiful

looks. Because, you know, since I'm not married, I don't amount to anything yet."

Mom's jaw drops open as she stares at me for what feels like a solid minute. Then her arms fly around me in a hug. "Oh, *honey!* I'm so sorry if anyone made you feel like that. Of course I've always hoped that you'd find a nice girl. I want you to be happy. But in your own time."

She pushes me away to stare curiously. "But you and Sadie seem so close. Is that really all pretend?"

"Well..." I scratch the back of my head. "It was, for the first day. But then we clicked. We've spent almost every minute together the past few days, and it feels like we both want this to be real. We...uhh...haven't actually talked about it."

Her delicate, perfectly manicured hand smacks my shoulder. "Then go get her, Joshie, and tell her how you feel. Tell her all of this rumor nonsense doesn't mean a darn thing. And you tell her I don't care one bit how long you've been together, I'm really glad she's here to spend the holidays with us."

"Thanks, Mom." I kiss her cheek, then hurry to the front door, where Dad and Dylan are waiting.

"We've gone through the entire building," Dad says. "She's definitely not here."

"She's probably gone to the bakery to get a coffee and work on her next photo drop." I'm not certain about that, but attempt to sound hopeful. "I'll go check there."

"I'll stay here and call you if I hear anything," Dad says.

"I'll take a quick drive around," Dylan says. "Mainly as an excuse to get away from this crowd."

"That mountain life really has made you a loner," I chuckle.

The weather outside has turned bitterly cold. It isn't quite snowing yet, but the air is thick with a damp chill that is definitely a warning that we're getting snow tonight.

And Sadie is out here in her little silver dancing shoes.

The thought of her being uncomfortable even for a split second sends tension spiraling up my spine. I have to find her immediately. Tell her that nobody cares what Tara says. Tell her that my mother adores her and doesn't care how short a time we've been together.

Most importantly, I have to find a way to explain that I'm already in love with her. It has nothing to do with all of this Christmas magic nonsense. It's just fact. Like gravity. Like the stars in the sky, or the rotation of the Earth. It just *is*.

We belong together.

It turns out that that deep sorrow, shame, and humiliation are good for focus. Who knew?

Since I had such incredible material to work with – the lights, the band, the decorations – and since the templates were already set from the other Christmas drops, the Holiday Ball content comes together by the time I finish my coffee.

The Wi-Fi at Edna’s Coffee Shop isn’t the strongest, so when I hit load, the progress bar moves pretty slowly. Closing a few of the open tabs in the hopes that will speed things up, I don’t even notice when a large, muscular frame sits down across the table from me.

Then I look up and startle. “Oh. Hi.”

Dylan pulls out his phone. “How’s your work going?”

“Just finished. It’s loading now.”

His thumbs tap out a message, then he gives me a sheepish smile. “Josh is worried sick about you. I just told him that I’m going to drive you back to the ball in a few minutes. Hope that’s okay?”

My head shakes violently. “Please don’t. I can’t go back there. Tara has it in for me, no idea why.”

He chuckles. “Josh and I were talking on the phone while we were driving around looking for you. Mom already likes you better than Tara, so don’t worry there.”

Somewhere in the heavy blanket of misery that has settled over me, there's a tiny spark of hope. "Really?"

"Yup." Dylan sighs, his huge shoulders lifting up and down.

"Listen, there's something that Josh doesn't know. Several years ago, Tara's family fell on hard times, and she got it in her head that the only way to fix her life and find stability is to latch onto a guy that would make a lot of money."

"Ugh. I mean, I get it, I guess, but..."

"Anyway, it was obvious that Josh would end up successful, being such a go-getter. So she set her sights on him, back when he was in finance."

"Oh. I had no idea."

"Neither did Josh," Dylan chuckles darkly. "But I could see what was happening. I *may* have mentioned to Shawn that Josh had a serious girlfriend. Obviously he told his brother."

I sputter a laugh. "That is pure evil."

"Hey, Eric had a crush on Tara all through freshman year of high school. I thought they might date a bit and it would get her off Josh's back. How was I to know Tara and Eric would end up married, and she'd be in our lives forever?"

"Great. If I stay with Josh, she's going to hate me forever. Spreading rumors, and who knows what else."

"She doesn't hate you, Sadie. She hates that she's not the one with Josh. She probably looked up how his app is taking off, and figured out how many fancy little purses she could buy with that kind of money." His deep chuckle is comforting, in a way.

The file upload completes, and my hands shake slightly as I pack up my laptop. "Do you think..." I don't even know what I'm asking, or how to phrase it.

Dylan reaches out to pat my trembling hand. "Sadie, Josh is a good man. One of the best. And he's completely head over heels for you. Just because your relationship started out as

kind of a..." He gestures vaguely. "Pretend couple thing. Whatever. It doesn't matter now."

"Oh. You've already heard about that."

"Yeah. Listen, you should really hear it from Josh, but the short answer is, everything is okay." His dark gaze is very similar to his brother's as he examines my eyes carefully. "That is, if you *want* everything to be okay?"

So many emotions flood my mind at once I can't speak.

Dylan clears his throat. "Listen, I'm no expert on dating and relationships. Far from it. But if the way you look at each other is a clue, then you two should be together." He smiles reassuringly. "I've never seen him so happy as he is with you."

"I just..." My voice is barely a whisper. "I hate the thought of being a burden to him."

Dylan bursts into a deep, rolling chuckle. "Are you kidding? Sadie, Josh is a giver. Always has been. The feeling that he's helping people is huge for him. If you ever need a hand, he's your man."

He stands up. "Except right now. I'm stepping in and dragging you back to that dancefloor."

Something warm spreads through my chest from his smile. I want to believe that everything might be okay. That Josh might want me even though I apparently cause drama, and some people in his family don't understand me.

When I look into his eyes, hopefully I'll know if I'm really the woman he needs.

Or if once again, I'm just a burden who has been dropped on someone.

Despite Dylan's text saying that he was on his way back to the dance with Sadie, I can't take a full breath until I actually see them walking in the door. He takes her coat and gear bag from her, then gently shoves her in my direction.

I'm already striding toward her, arms aching to hold her soft, sexy body against me. But when we're face to face, she freezes. "I'm so sorry," she whispers.

"How did the photo drop turn out?"

She blinks in surprise. "Amazing, I think. I hope. It's uploaded, anyway."

"Listen." My arm curls around her waist, drawing her close. "Mom knows that Tara is a gossipy bitch. She also knows, because I just told her, that I stretched the truth a bit when I said we'd been together for a few months instead of a few days. Nobody cares. Mom has already had a word with Eric to either shut his wife up, or get her out of here asap."

Sadie's lovely blue eyes are huge. "I didn't mean to cause any fuss."

"You didn't, baby. It was all her. Trust me, she's always pulling crap like that."

"But... You had to tell your mother that you lied to her."

I can't stop my eyes from rolling. "She understood it was for a good reason." My palm rubs small circles at the base of her spine through her silky dress, and I feel the tension in her

body loosen a bit. “For the record, she *really* likes you. She thinks we’re good together.”

“Are we, though?” Her bottom lip trembles, her shoulders twitch. “You have given me everything. You’ve already helped me so much. And I just...”

“You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.” My words echo off the marble tile of the foyer. “Sadie, you are sweet and light. Creative and fascinating. It’s going to take me years and years to figure you out, and I already know that I want you in my life permanently so that I can do that.”

My other arm wraps around her as she wobbles slightly on her heels. “Really?”

“I’m one thousand percent sure.” Tipping her chin up with my finger, I graze a soft whisper of a kiss across her perfect lips. “But I’m the kind of guy who wants to lock things down and have an ironclad guarantee.”

Her left eyebrow raises saucily. “What does that mean?”

Taking her hand, I lead her to the center of the dance floor. It’s packed, so we can only snake our way slowly through the swaying couples.

As soon as we begin to dance, Sadie bursts out laughing. “Oh! Is this the Christmas Magic thing you mentioned? If we dance enough at this ball, we’ll be together forever?”

My lips graze her ear. “Only if that’s what you want, baby.”

A slight tremor runs through her, and her bottom lip trembles as she looks up at me. “Yes.”

My fingers thread through her silky hair as I hold her face gently as we stop dancing. It feels like time itself slows down as I pour all of my passion, all of my love into a kiss that makes Sadie quiver and moan. Her hands grip the back of my shoulders, holding me tightly as if she never wants to let me go.

Another song starts immediately, allowing us to snuggle and kiss while everyone conveniently ignores us, dancing and

laughing around us.

Finally I force myself to pull away. “You know how there are ordinary secrets, and there are Christmas secrets?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like when someone says, ‘Don’t look in the hallway closet, and don’t ask why.’ You know exactly what they mean, and you play along?”

She laughs. “Okay, yeah.”

My eyes lock on hers. “I’m just saying, for no reason whatsoever, that it feels a bit crazy to tell a girl I’m in love with her after knowing her for less than a week...”

Sadie freezes, not even blinking.

“But maybe that’s something for you to think about. I don’t know if we’re on the same page, but if I’m way ahead of you, I’m more than happy to wait for you to catch up. We’ve been going too fast right from the start, anyway.”

Her smile is slow and soft. “Honestly, I think we’re on the same page. And, um... I’m hiding words in the closet as well.”

My lips crush to hers too roughly, yet I can’t stop. If we weren’t surrounded by the entire town, I’d have torn off her dress already. “Want to be very rude and leave early?”

“Yes.” Her answer is instant. Then she grins. “Unless there’s a certain number of songs we have to dance to in order to conjure up those magic Christmas relationship vibes—”

Taking her hand, I twirl her with a dramatic flourish so that her dress flares out around her, then bend her backwards for a cheesy movie star kiss.

“The whole town just saw you claim me,” she gasps. “I mean, is that what—”

“Yes.” My voice takes on a dark growl I’ve never heard before. “You’re mine.”

Sweeping her upright, I kiss her again, stopping only to join in the applause for the band when they stop for a break.

We use the ensuing shuffle to grab our things and head for the car.

There's something in the way she clutches me more tightly at every opportunity. The way she looks at me with such light in her eyes.

It feels like she's made a decision about me.

That she knows I'm hers, and she's mine, no matter how we started.

SADIE

It's downright weird that Josh's parents probably totally know we left the ball early to go home and have sex. In their house. When we've been together less than a week.

Weirder still, I don't care in the least. But you know what? I've spent so many years worrying about whether or not people will like me and accept me. Now all that matters is Josh, and the way I feel when I'm with him.

As soon as we get back to the house, Josh sweeps me into the foyer, dipping me back in another movie star kiss that takes my breath away. His huge hands grip the silk of my dress in a possessive manner that makes heat crawl all the way up to my throat.

"I need you," he murmurs against my lips. "Naked. Against me. Right now."

Barely managing a nod, I take his hand, following him down to the basement as my stomach twists in knots. This is it. My curiosity will finally be satisfied.

We enter the quiet green bedroom and Josh locks the door.

"I don't know how much you're ready for yet, Sadie," he says gently, searching my eyes carefully as his fingertips trail down my cheek. "But I at least need to get you naked with me so I can admire you and hold you. Is that okay?"

I'm already nodding. "Yes."

Josh undoes his tie, throwing it on the chair, followed by his jacket. Sets his watch on the dresser. Leaves his socks on

the floor as he uses the opposite foot to push them off.

Should I be undressing as well?

“Your dainty little fingers would probably find it easier to undo these tiny buttons.”

Relieved to have a task to distract me, I unbutton his dress shirt slowly, feeling the warmth of his hard body right through the fabric.

After I push it off his shoulders, he grips my waist, staring at me hungrily. Feeling like an object of desire is a brand new sensation for me, but between the glow in his green eyes, and the way he stares at my nipples through the dress as they tighten into points, I think I like it.

He turns me around, slipping first one strap and then the other off my shoulders. We shimmy and twist the fabric down over my hips until it pools at my feet on the floor. Warm hands cup my breasts as he pulls my back against his chest.

“So sexy.” His hot breath against my ear makes me shiver. I’m absolute putty in his hands, ready for anything he wants.

“I need to taste you.”

Spinning in his arms, I stretch up to kiss him, the skin of my bare breasts extra sensitive against his hard chest. I stifle a moan as we rock together, then he hooks his thumbs into the side of my fancy new lacy panties.

“I want to taste you *everywhere*.”

My knees buckle and I lock my hands around the back of his neck to prevent me from dropping to the floor. “Anything you want.”

His eyes lock with mine. “Anything? As in...*anything*?”

“Yes.” My nod is slow and serious, even though my mind is spinning.

The second my last piece of clothing hits the floor, Josh lifts me in the air, lying me across the bed. At first, he kisses my lips, my throat, my collarbone. Then his hands roam everywhere, finding areas that I didn’t even realize were so

sensitive – the underside of my breasts, a spot behind my ear, the hollow of my throat.

He begins kissing lower down my stomach until his huge shoulders spread my legs wide. Even though it makes me feel exposed, the way he looks at me so tenderly pushes any insecurity aside.

Josh groans as he uses his thumbs to gently spread me open. “Beautiful,” he whispers. “Even more beautiful than I thought you would be.”

Sparks fly behind my eyelids as his tongue drags slowly through my center. It’s as if he already knows how to work my body perfectly, using his fingers, his mouth, his hot breath and seductive glances to reassure me and yet wind me up at the same time.

I begin to squirm, so he pins me down, his left hand locking my lower body into position. It feels so possessive. Once again, the thrill of being his makes my head spin.

I’m so excited that I almost don’t realize how wet I am. It’s as if my skin is dripping onto his tongue as he laps harder.

“I need to feel you come, baby,” he breathes against my damp flesh.

“To make sure that this Christmas magic nonsense is real?”

He stops for a moment and grins at me. “We *are* real, Sadie. That’s the only thing that’s ever going to matter.”

His mouth lowers, slipping his tongue inside me as my fingers clutch at the sides of his hair. Then he retracts it slowly, then enters me again, over and over, until my thighs are tensing around his head.

Finally he replaces his tongue with a finger so that he can wrap his lips around my clit, licking and sucking as I start to lose control, wiggling on the bed while staring down at this beautiful man.

A deep shudder runs through me at the thought of him lying over me. Moving with me. Sharing every single thing we’re about to share.

His mouth covers my entire pussy, wet and warm and determined to hit every single sensitive spot. His left hand tightens, holding my hips as still as possible as his thick middle finger slowly eases inside me.

Oh. My. God.

The world stops. A flash of heat runs through me, as a deep tremble rolls from my toes to my shoulders. Sheer pleasure floods every nerve and cell in my body in deep pulsing waves.

It feels like I'm falling a hundred feet, then I try to find my breath as I blink the universe back into focus.

The connection as I stare up into Josh's wide eyes is intense. His thumb grazes my cheek as he whispers, "Tell me what you want, beautiful Sadie."

The only thing between my skin and the large, hard ridge in his suit pants is a couple of layers of fabric. "I want you naked," I whisper as he kisses along my shoulder, holding my body against his.

"And then what?"

The arch of my foot drags along his calf. "I want...you."

It's hard not to moan as his warmth disappears, even though it's just for a moment. I hear his pants and belt hit the floor. By the time he lies down next to me again, I think I might explode from excitement.

My palm reaches down to tentatively grip his length. "I love that you're so warm, just, *everywhere*."

Josh pulls back from where he was kissing my temple, to study my expression. "I love that you...are you."

My breath catches. "I love everything about you, even the things I don't know yet."

His hips move, sliding his shaft up and down in my hand. "We're both going to know everything about each other, Sadie. I don't think I could hide anything from you if I tried."

It's clear that he's giving me plenty of time to think before I make this important decision. But I've already made it.

"I want to know what you feel like inside me."

My legs spread, knees bending up as I shift to rub the thick, round head of his throbbing cock straight through my wet center. It's oddly satisfying to watch a deep shudder roll through his huge shoulders, his biceps flexing as he holds his weight above me. "Wait," he whispers. "Condom?"

"Oh, I had to go on the pill a while back to straighten out a few things."

He grins, then drags his cock slowly along my entrance, wetting the tip and massaging my clit at the same time. I'm still so wet that when he notches his cock inside me, I assume he's going to sink right in.

Instead, Josh kisses me gently. "Let me know if it's too much, my sweet baby," he murmurs. "I don't want to hurt you."

Even in this moment where he must be dying to get started already, Josh is slow and tender. He eases himself inside bit by bit as I wrap my legs around his waist.

Then I realize what he just called me. *His* sweet baby.

I'm *his*.

Oh!

My arms tighten around the back of his shoulders as I bury my face in the crook of his neck. "Everything about you feels so good," I whisper.

"Do you want a little more?" I can feel his muscles tensing from trying to be so careful with me.

I pull my head back to smile up at him. "I want you, Josh. I want everything. So please stop being so gentle and just show me what all the fuss is about."

His lips brush against mine until I feel his smile. "Your wish is my command. I want to spend the rest of my life giving you everything you want, baby."

After years of not being sure of what I wanted, the knowledge that I've finally found my purpose in life is deeply satisfying.

I was put on this Earth to care for Sadie. To be her man.

Her soft breasts press against my firm chest, our hearts drumming in the same rhythm. I feel huge over her delicate, curvy body. My cock feels harder and thicker than it ever has in my life as I ease inside slowly, taking measured, careful strokes. Her soft pussy is so warm and wet, and her tiny noises are driving me crazy.

Studying her eyes, I watch as Sadie adjusts to my thickness. There's a slight wince as I stretch her open. An open-mouthed gasp as I slide deeper. Then her legs tighten around my waist. "Oh my...wow," she mutters shakily.

"Too much?"

"No. It's just...a lot."

The pressure of her snug pussy around me makes my breath turn ragged. When I sink home inside her, Sadie shudders hard. "Yeah..." Her voice is faint. "That's...wow."

Kissing her gently, I rock my hips, still taking long, slow strokes. "You feel absolutely perfect, baby."

I begin to move a bit quicker, my arm scooping under her back to hold her against me. Sadie's luscious mouth opens in ecstatic surprise. Looking down, I watch as the base of my cock grazes her clit with every deep stroke. "You like that?"

“I don’t think that *like* is a strong enough word here.”

I chuckle. “Then tell me you love it.”

Her short nails dig into the back of my shoulders. “I love it.”

My free hand brushes her nipple, then squeezes her breast firmly. “You know those words that are tucked away in the back of the closet?”

Her eyes sparkle. “Yes.”

“I’m thinking them *really* hard right now.”

“Me too.”

This time when I kiss her, it’s like something has been shaken loose. Her body clings to mine, hips grinding as she rocks hard against me. I can feel her tight pussy gripping me, triggering a growl in the back of my throat.

“So hot. So sexy. My precious girl is a goddess.”

Sadie’s lovely blue eyes are always expressive. Yet I realize every time I call her mine, something extra takes hold inside her. “You like that, don’t you, gorgeous? That you’re mine? That you belong to me?”

“Yes.” Her body is starting to tremble as I plunge deep, stretching her, filling her, hitting every single nerve.

“That also means I’m yours, Sadie. Everything I am. Everything I have. My house, my business, my insatiable urge to buy you proper winter clothing. All yours.”

Her eyelids half close as I increase my pace, watching in fascination as her cheeks flush and her lips fall open and Sadie loses herself completely.

Then I feel her inner walls tightening around me, her entire body twitching and shaking as she cries out, helpless and breathtakingly gorgeous as she comes all over me.

The sight of this shy girl letting everything go is what pushes me over the edge myself. My back teeth grind as I barely control my movements, careful not to be too rough, but unable to resist several fast, hard strokes. The climax roars

through my entire body from my calves to my shoulders, my cock throbbing as I explode inside her, looking deeply into her eyes.

Clutching her against me, I find my breath, then let out a chuckle. Kissing her nose, I whisper, “This is the happiest I’ve ever been in my life, baby.”

Blinking hard, she looks up at me through wet eyelashes, flushed, her hair a mess, and positively glowing as she grins at me. “Me too.”

Pulling out slowly, I lie beside her and she immediately snuggles into my arms. “You’re a little animal when you let go, aren’t you?”

Her palm doesn’t exactly smack my chest, more like flops against it weakly. “Don’t tease me right now, you weirdo.”

“Not teasing. Admiring.” Taking her hand, I thread our fingers together.

Sadie bites her lip. “I guess we can’t ever go upstairs again.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your parents are going to know what we’ve been up to.”

“It’s honestly fine. But they always spend all day on Christmas Eve racing around town visiting friends and distant relatives anyway. We probably won’t even see them at this point until Christmas morning.”

She sighs contentedly. “Then what are we going to do tomorrow?”

“Hopefully a lot more of this,” I say, rubbing her hip affectionately. “Plus movies, ordering in pizza, driving around town if you want more winter wonderland photos. A full day of holiday relaxation.”

Her eyes fall closed. “Sounds perfect.”

“No, *you’re* perfect.” My lips brush her forehead. I think she’s half asleep, but I tell her anyway.

“I’ve been searching for a purpose in life. It’s you, Sadie. Which is exciting, thrilling, and it’s going to be a fascinating challenge. But it’s also a huge relief.”

“Challenge?” she barely breathes.

“Yeah. Now I’m going to have to think up more and more interesting dates. Drive you anywhere you need to go to get cool photos. Even out my schedule so that I don’t fall into three day code-a-thons where I lose all sense of time.”

“That’s okay,” she whispers. “I’ve always been fine with plenty of alone time.”

“I want you to have all of the space you want, and all of the togetherness you need. How’s that?”

She smiles, barely nodding. Then her breathing changes, and she falls fast asleep in my arms.

I’m going to spoil my special girl. Shower her with love and attention until she understands how much she means to me.

And as soon as I have my morning caffeine zipping around my system, I’m going to plan a Christmas Eve of ultimate lounging so that my sweet girl can be well rested for Christmas Day.

SADIE

Christmas morning this year is filled with firsts. Waking up in the arms of a man that loves me. Being rushed upstairs in pajamas with level 99 bedhead to sip cocoa by the fireplace with a family who won't stop smiling at me.

Feeling wanted. Cherished. Belonging.

Yesterday was a day of blessed loafing. Just the two of us, with movies, a long drive to see the sights, and frankly the best pizza I've ever had.

We snuck back to our room before anyone got home, spending a full ten hours in bed. Only eight of which were actually spent *cough* sleeping.

Then we were wakened by Miriam hollering down the stairs: "Nobody oversleeps on Christmas Day around here!"

Dylan pulls the stockings down from the row of hooks, and I blink back tears at a huge red one with my name embroidered across the top that has appeared overnight.

Miriam shoots me a wink. "Santa always finds you, honey."

Josh and I take turns pulling things out of our stockings, laughing at the randomness of the small gifts. Raspberry soap. A mystery novel. Chocolates. A rubber duckie in a sailor hat.

A loud chuckle makes us look over to see Dylan pulling out a set of jumper cables, sending an avalanche of wrapped candies across his lap. "Perfect! Thanks, Santa."

“Okay now.” Miriam stands up, dusting her hands off on her housecoat. “Time for my special Christmas quiche and hazelnut coffee.”

“I’ll help.” Mark follows her to the kitchen, then turns back to me. “There are at least three huge meals today, Sadie, so either pig out or pace yourself. No judgment either way here.”

Josh grabs my hand, leading me to the front door where he bundles me up in his huge coat. I slide on my boots and we go out on the porch.

Dreamy, dusty snowflakes float on the breeze before landing on the few inches that fell last night. “You’re right,” I whisper. “Winter wonderland.”

Josh turns to me, his green eyes filled with so much emotion that it steals my breath.

“I love you, Sadie. I can’t wait any longer to tell you. I don’t care that it’s too fast. I need you. I want you to need me.”

My chin tips up and down on its own. “I do need you. And I love you, too.”

He’s already kissed me in so many ways, yet this one is different. Soft as the snow. Warm as the fire. Nestled in his arms, I feel powerful and grounded, maybe for the first time ever.

The door clicks open behind us, and I sense someone there, but Josh doesn’t stop kissing me for a moment. Then he turns to scowl at Miriam who is taking photos and grinning from ear to ear.

“I promise I won’t always be so intrusive, but your kids are going to want a photo of your first Christmas together, and besides, the photographer almost never has any photos of themselves, right?” She closes the door while calling out, “Don’t get a chill out there!”

Josh murmurs, “About that. Do you want kids?”

“Not immediately. Someday when we’re really settled.”

“Just one or two?”

“Yeah.”

“Will you move into my house in Kingsville as soon as we get back to town?”

Looking up, his eyes are so clear and calm. As if he'd just asked me if I'd like another cup of coffee. Those stories of men not wanting to commit simply don't apply to Josh. It's like we were meant to be – finding each other at precisely the right time.

“Yes.” There's zero hesitation. I already know it's right.

He kisses my hand. “You do know there's going to be ice on your finger before we come back next year, don't you?”

It takes me a few seconds to realize what he means. I blink in surprise. “Aren't thoughts like that supposed to stay in the back of the closet for a bit longer?” I whisper.

“I need you to know that I'm serious. This is forever, Sadie. I'm all in.”

Stretching up, I kiss the tip of his nose. “I'm all in, too. Just warn me to get my nails done, okay?”

Josh's eyes lock with mine as his strong hands run up and down my back, then he looks to the sky. “Not that this has anything to do with *anything*, but maybe you should go get your nails done around...February twelfth or thirteenth?”

Swallowing hard, I nod seriously. “That sounds like a great time for a manicure. My cuticles get so dry over the winter.”

He kisses me again with his entire body, not caring that his family might be watching through the curtains or that we should be getting dressed for brunch.

Josh kisses me like I belong to him. Like I'm the only person in the world who matters.

For the first time in my entire life, I feel precious. Wanted.

Truly loved.

EPILOGUE ONE

JOSH

** Next Christmas Eve Eve **

Keeping our engagement under wraps for almost a year felt a little sneaky and perhaps wrong, but having a secret just between us was kind of amusing – even though Sadie hated leaving her ring at home when we visited Holly Valley in the summer.

She’s been doing so well at work that her boss Parker gave her a huge raise in the spring. It seems like he wants to keep her happy.

I’ve been really good about only working Monday to Friday, and it’s been a blast taking little weekend trips all over the place so that Sadie can take themed photos for every season, holiday, and celebration. Who knew there was a blueberry pie festival just three hours away? Because I sure didn’t.

“Are you almost ready?” I call toward the bathroom, where Sadie has been getting ready for the past half an hour.

“Just one more minute,” she calls back.

We came to Holly Valley a week early this year so that she could get all of her photos out of the way and we could spend time relaxing with my family. I know that it means a lot to Sadie to have a connection here in the town where her parents once lived, and since Eric and Tara moved away, presumably for his work but who knows, there has been absolutely zero family drama.

When she finally emerges in a silver gown with a few lavender flowers in her hair, I clutch my heart, staggering backward. “You’re so gorgeous, it’s actually dangerous.” Taking her hand, I spin her slowly in a circle, admiring every curve of her graceful body.

“It’s not too much?” she asks.

“No way. It’s super festive, and if anything, it’s a bit understated for the occasion.”

Her pretty angel face lights up as she stretches up to kiss me, but I jump back in alarm. “What about lip gloss?”

“It’s lip *stain* this time,” she laughs. “You should be safe.”

After a light kiss that still sends flutters through my belly, we go upstairs.

“Finally,” Mom says, coming into the living room just as Uncle Steve and Aunt Stephanie are sitting down. Shawn and Amy look so much happier lately, as they smile from the loveseat.

Dylan raises his eyebrow as he checks out my suit. “Fancier than usual,” he comments. “What’s up?”

“We have a little announcement,” I say, before muttering to Sadie, “Cover your ears, quick. Shriek incoming.”

Sure enough, Mom squeals, staring at the sparkling diamond on Sadie’s left hand. “I knew it! Honestly, I’m surprised you waited an entire year!” She hugs Sadie so hard I’m worried she might suffocate her, before throwing her arms around me.

“Can I tell her now?” Sadie whispers.

“Of course.”

Mom steps back, clutching Dad’s hand, her eyes glassy with the tears she’s holding back.

“You know that I’m kind of quiet,” Sadie says. “Big parties aren’t my thing. Making a fuss, being the center of attention... It’s just not me.”

The doorbell rings, and Dylan jumps up to answer it. “Reverend Johnson? What are you doing here?”

“Come on in!” Sadie calls out. Then she turns back to my mother, grinning as her eyes sparkle mischievously. “We figured since we’re already here and dressed up, would it be okay to do the wedding right now in your living room?”

For quite possibly the first time in her life, Mom is utterly speechless. Dad’s arm tightens around Mom’s waist as her fingers flutter in front of her open mouth. “Of course,” he says. “Anything you like, my dear.”

“We’re going to the ball afterward,” Sadie continues. “Since the whole town will be there, we figure that can be our reception.”

Dylan claps me on the back. “Very efficient. Well done, sir.”

Aunt Stephanie and Amy are dabbing at their eyes, and it even looks like Dad has a lump in his throat.

“Is this everyone?” Reverend Johnson asks me.

“Yes. We’re ready.”

Sadie walks over to the Christmas tree, where she had hidden a very small bouquet of white silk roses earlier. The minister stands between the tree and the fireplace. Sadie and I stand in front of him, with everyone else in a semicircle behind.

As he pulls out his Bible, I lean down to whisper, “Hey, fiancée. You’re about to become my wife. Are there any hidden thoughts left lingering at the back of your mental closet?”

Her nose crinkles as she grins up at me. “None. I love you more than anything. More than everything.”

Kissing the top of her hair, I breathe into her ear, “Same. From the second I saw you, I knew that we belonged together. Thanks for taking a chance on me.”

“Thanks for...” She reaches up, her palm stroking my cheek. I lower my ear to her lips. “Thank you for wanting me.”

For helping me. For helping me be me.”

“Always.”

Straightening up, I take her hand in mine as Reverend Johnson smiles.

“Let me begin by wishing everyone a Merry Christmas Eve Eve...”

EPILOGUE TWO

** Eight Years Later **

My finger tightens, ready to capture the moment the breeze catches Cassie's light auburn hair. Sure enough, when Josh calls out to our four-year-old daughter her head spins, the wispy waves flaring out behind her shoulders as she waves the pink cotton candy toward him.

Click. There's my shot. Her little blue sundress looks perfect against the peach and orange sunset of the Kingsville beach.

List-Go-Do has grown so much over the years that I have plenty of other artists working under me in the visual department now. I don't have to be as obsessed as I used to be about catching every single occasion. But I still keep my eyes open for every opportunity.

Cassie is the perfect model for summertime fun and family themes. I always compose and crop the images so they never show her face, just her hands and feet, or maybe the back of her head.

Josh helps her with the last few bites of cotton candy, then reaches into his shoulder bag for a wipe to clean off her sticky fingers. He's such a wonderful father. The perfect balance of helping and caring while making sure that our daughter has some space to run around and get dirty.

"Did you ladies decide where we're having dinner tonight?" he asks, scooping Cassie up to balance her on his hip.

“I don’t know. She just ate all of that pink fluff. She can’t still be hungry, can she?”

Cassie sticks out her bottom lip. “Mommy! Candy isn’t dinner.”

“Oh, right. I forgot. So what do we need for dinner?”

She stares into space, thinking. Then Josh whispers in her ear, and her huge eyes light up. “Chicken fingers at Ray’s!”

Even though Claudia has long since moved on, the servers at Ray’s Diner are still wonderful, and the food is consistently fantastic.

“What do you say, baby?” Josh asks, brushing his lips against my cheekbone. “Want to go back to the very beginning of our adventure?”

“Oh, right,” I laugh, packing away my camera. “I forgot that part. I was just thinking about the pie.”

We turn toward the minivan, as Josh reaches down to give my butt a playful smack. “Cheeky.”

“I learned from the best.”

Years ago I would never have imagined walking off into the sunset with a gorgeous husband and adorable toddler at my side.

Everything wonderful that has happened in my life came from taking a chance at a diner one night, and asking a man if I could take photos of his hands.

Best. Decision. Ever.



It’s extremely hard to read Mrs. Mackenzie’s handwriting, but her potato salad recipe is currently being typed up and will be shared with the Haley Travis email list soon.



You'll see Claudia again in *Fake Summer Wife*.

You'll meet Dylan again in a steamy mountain series coming in early 2024.

For more steamy and sweet holiday romance in Holly Valley with the three King brothers, keep reading for a preview of *Jacob: 3 Kings for Christmas...*

PREVIEW

Finally I couldn't resist anymore, and reached out to hold the hand that was sitting on her knee for a brief second. Even that simple touch made my pulse go off kilter.

"Just let the bizarre Christmas vibes wash over you," I said in a spooky voice. "You'll be one of us before you know it." I whispered again, "One of us."

Sierra's head fell back as she laughed. "What have I gotten myself in for?"

The Uber was already turning onto Second Street, so I only had her for another minute. "There are a lot of secret underground tricks and coping mechanisms," I said quickly. "Like drinking sparkling water so that people think you already have a cocktail in your hand, and telling people that you've already eaten the second you arrive so that they won't push food on you. Also, always wear the most comfortable boots you can manage."

She smirked. "I should be writing this down."

"Or, you could take my number," I offered, trying not to sound too eager and scare her off. "I'm here for the entire holidays, and would be more than happy to share my hard-earned survival wisdom with a newbie."

Sierra hesitated, then flashed me a shy smile. "Well, Aunt Lucy certainly approves of you, so I guess it can't hurt." She entered my number in a cracked silver phone that looked positively ancient.

“No offense, but I hope you’ve asked Santa for a new phone for Christmas,” I joked.

She tried to give me a stern look, narrowing her eyes, but it dissolved into a giggle. “I spent every last penny on the plane ticket here,” she said. “So Santa really is my only hope.”

The car stopped in front of Williams Hardware. It was tricky to see through the front windows since they were all painted up with dancing snowmen, but Lucy was at the counter.

“Back in a minute, Jerry,” I said, jumping out of the car to grab Sierra’s suitcases.

Lucy was busy with a customer so I rolled them just inside the door, as Sierra turned to me. “Thank you so much,” she said. “I really appreciate the ride.”

“And don’t forget the life-saving advice,” I said. “In fact, why don’t you text me right now so that I have your number? I can let you know about all of the best festivities.”

She pulled out her phone, then looked confused. “Why is cell service so sketchy right downtown?”

“May I?” I took her phone and connected her to the downtown wi-fi. “Since we’re in a valley, reception was patchy. The town got together and got some sort of booster thing. It’s free, but you need a tour guide like me to learn the password. See? More insider information.”

Making her laugh filled me with such a deep satisfaction that I wanted to make it my life’s mission. “I’m sure I’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah, I hope so.” Sierra’s shy smile made my heart beat triple time.

I gave her a wave, then got back in the car and checked my phone.

Unknown number: Hi. It’s Sierra.

I entered Sierra as a contact, fully aware that I was grinning like an idiot.

It had been years since I'd gotten a girl's number, or thought about anything but work, and promoting the family business.

Never in my life had I had a date to the Christmas Eve Eve dance.

I already had a feeling that this year's holidays were going to be extra special.



Don't miss *Jacob: 3 Kings for Christmas*

available now on Amazon, Kindle Unlimited, or with all 3 King brothers in one paperback.

ALSO BY HALEY TRAVIS

The Lumberjack's Quirky Girl

I probably shouldn't have ogled Braden Oakley's big axe. *Oops.*

Tall as a redwood and built like a moose, the devastatingly gorgeous lumberjack should have nothing in common with little miss artsy-pants—aka, *me*. So how come the harder I try to stay away, the more I end up wrapped up in his muscled arms begging for more of his hard...wood?

Meet all four *HOT* Oakley brothers [HERE](#).

Possessing My Lily

From the second her delicate body thumped into my chest, I knew Lily was mine.

I'll find a way to prove I'm worth getting through her fears. That my possession will be the best thing for both of us.

Her New Bodyguard: Jackson

It was supposed to be a simple personal security job. But Ashley was so sexy and innocent that my need to care for her was far more than professional. She was sunshine and warmth and everything I truly desired. She felt like... home.

Mackton Mechanics

Rev your engines and get ready to fall for these hot mechanics! These huge, rough men are comfortable working with steel. What will happen when they're tinkering with a sweet girl's heart instead of a motor?

Never Date The Boss

Ashley was talked into one little "business date" with her boss, and everything changed in a heartbeat. Or rather, a flutter of them.

Daddy's Billionaire Boss

When Emily discovers her Dad's boss is the improbable man her aunt predicted she'd fall for, can she fit into his world?

Mr. Right... as Rain

A sexy older man appeared out of the gloomy rain to save me before a job interview. Maybe it was the enticing good luck kiss from a stranger, but I got both the job and an instant boyfriend.



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