

*Frosty*

**BEGINNINGS**

AVA GRAY

# FROSTY BEGINNINGS


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AVA GRAY

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## BLURB

**Drake shattered my heart right before I was about to tell him I was pregnant.**

I'd be silly to fall in love with him again.

Especially after not having seen him for five years.

But fate has an awful way of shaking you up and testing your willpower.

Turns out, Drake has a three-year-old daughter and I'm her new nanny.

He has no clue that the boy I carry in my arms is his own flesh and blood.

And yet, I roam the streets with him like we are a family.

We may have spent five years apart but the sparks between us are very much alive.

His arms around me as we shop for the holidays in the snow melts my heart.

If only I were an ice queen and could resist his charm...

Drake will find out my secret sooner or later.



# KIRA

**P**resent

The double beep of a car horn had me scurrying faster across the street. I twisted and waved at the driver. I hadn't seen them, and I didn't recognize the car, but odds were good I knew them. Besides, it was my fault for being in the street.

Too lazy to walk to the end of the block and cross at the intersection, I took a chance and dashed across the street. I flashed a quick glance around to see if one of Millers Glen's finest police officers were around. The last thing I needed this week was a ticket for J-walking.

I pulled my red puffer jacket a little closer together. It didn't fit as well as some of my other jackets, but today I wanted to look good, leave my interviewer with an impression. Even if it was that I was the one in a puffer jacket.

I yanked on the front of my jacket and adjusted my scarf. I loved the way it framed my shape, made me look a little curvier. I looked cute, but it didn't close in the front. The curves I had were too much for that. The weather was getting colder, and I had worn the jacket for fashion not for function, and I really needed its function right now.

The aroma of freshly baked something with cinnamon caught my attention. Rolls? Cookies? I didn't care. It smelled good, and that was followed by the allure of freshly brewed coffee. I certainly hadn't planned on stepping into the café.

I only had a few more blocks to walk before I got home, and with the dropping temperatures, I really wanted to get home.

But the cinnamon and coffee made me think of warmth and comfort, and I was in need of both.

A bell over the door jingled as I stepped inside.

“Hi, Sunny,” I called out and waved as I stepped inside.

A shiver ripped through my body before I was able to relax into the warmth.

“Hey, Kira. How ya doin?” she asked from behind the counter.

The café was practically empty. I crossed the space from the door to the cash register and leaned on the counter as she continued to wipe down surfaces on the other side in her work area.

“Eh, I’ve been better. You know how it is.”

“Tell me about it.” She tossed the rag in her hands down and leaned her hip against the opposite side of the counter.

“I plan on it. But first what smells so good? I swear it reached down the block and grabbed me by the nostrils and dragged my cold ass in here.”

Sunny chuckled. “Steph is baking again.”

I leaned farther into her space and made grabby hands in the air. “Gimme!” I demanded.

“Kira, you don’t want any, trust me.”

I collapsed what was left of me on the counter in a pitiful heap. “I just had a crappy interview. Please give me one of the cinnamon yummys,” I whined.

“Only if you get your body off my clean counter. Now I have to disinfect it from your germs.”

With a humph and some toddler-like behavior, I righted myself. It was nice to be able to just let go of everything around Sunny. She understood me better than most and had the distinct honor of being my best friend. Or maybe it was my honor to be her friend? Either way, we could be juvenile without judgement when feeling less than successful and succumbing to the pressures of being an adult in the world.

Apparently appeased by my standing up, she pushed off the counter and stepped through the doorway that divided the front of the café from the kitchen. She came back with a long-twisted pastry on a plate. Setting the plate in front of me, she turned and grabbed a paper cup, pulled the lever to pour me a coffee.

“Steph made these twist things. They smell better than they taste.”

“Anything that smells this good can’t be bad.” I picked up the treat and took a large bite. Immediately all moisture in my mouth was gone. It was dry. Dry and bland, and... I started coughing. It was like my mouth was suddenly full of cinnamon flavored sand.

“Are you okay?” Some man asked.

A napkin appeared before my eyes. I snatched it and hacked out the twist. It was obviously one of Steph’s dog treats that she made from time to time.

Sunny handed me the coffee.

I took a long slow sip. I didn’t want to burn my mouth, but I wanted that cinnamon monstrosity washed away.

“Thank you,” I said with a dry groggy voice.

I looked at the man, but I couldn’t really focus. My eyes were watering, and the tears combined with my contacts made for blurry vision. He was tall, and his voice seemed familiar.

“I tried to warn you,” Sunny said. I think she had a smirk on her face.

I had to blink a few times before I could see that, yes, she was pleased with what she would consider a joke. I continued to blink, and the tall man came into focus.

I started coughing again.

He reached around and patted me on the back.

“Are you okay, Kira?” he asked again.

This time I couldn’t blame Sunny’s demented sense of humor or the dog biscuit for my reaction. This time it was all my own

fault. Or maybe it was his.

“Drake,” I managed to choke out. I shook my head and held up my hand. This coughing choking fit of an embarrassing situation was not over. I needed to clear my head and my windpipe if I was going to be able to talk.

The riot going on in my heart and my gut were a completely different issue and set of mortifications I was choosing to ignore at the moment. I had priorities, and breathing was at the top of the list.

Freaking out that Drake Schriver stood in front of me was low on that list. Or at least that’s what I was screaming at myself.

What the hell was Drake doing here? I should have ignored the siren lure of cinnamon and just gone home. I’d be home by now. No doggy treat stuck in my molars, and no knowledge that Drake was back.

“Breathing?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m breathing.”

“What are the odds of running into you here?”

“It’s the only coffee shop in Millers Glen. So, it’s not all that weird,” I said.

I had to swallow down my heart as it threatened to beat straight up my throat. I may have been acting like a whiny brat only moments earlier, but I was a grown woman. I wasn’t going to let this man fluster me by his unexpected presence.

“I meant us both being in town at the same time. Are you back visiting family for the holidays? Wait, I shouldn’t just bombard you with all these questions. We should catch up sometime. Unless you’ve got time now.”

I cut a quick glance over at Sunny. Her eyes were wide, and she was making little flickering motions with her fingers. She wanted me to go sit and talk with him.

“I’m not doing anything.” I smiled and handed the cup of coffee back to her. “Can I get topped off, and maybe a human cookie this time?”

“Sure thing. Why don’t you two go and sit down; I’ll bring it right over,” she said. She had her fake customer service smile on.

Drake held out his arm and guided me toward a table next to the window. His coat was already hung over the back of a chair, and a tablet rested on the table next to a coffee and a plate full of crumbs.

Had he been looking out the window? Did he see me cross the street and walk past the window before coming in here?

I clenched my teeth together and sorted through the jumble of thoughts crashing around in my head. This couldn’t be any more embarrassing than chomping down on a dog biscuit and choking in front of him. Of course, that had never crossed my mind as to how I would meet him again after all this time.

That fantasy involved a strapless dress with a hip high slit that exposed my thigh and being surrounded by a bevy of really hot men all clamoring for my attention. And then there would be Drake, in the middle of a group of men who would make him look plain, begging for my forgiveness.

I sat and watched as he adjusted his items and sat across from me.

Who was I kidding? Men who were better looking than Drake didn’t exist. He was the pinnacle when it came to attractiveness. And I certainly never attended the kind of parties that my fantasy required. The short of it was, I had wanted to look good. Better than good. And I had wanted him to not be so important. Apparently, I hadn’t gotten over that yet.

“Are you in town long?” he asked.

I smiled as Sunny slid a plate of cookies between us and put my coffee in front of me. “I put some extra on there. Sorry about the prank. These are on me.”

“Thanks.” I wanted to reach out and grab her hand for some moral support. Instead, I reached out and took a snickerdoodle. My favorite.



“I think you must have gotten somewhat confused. I live here. I haven’t left,” I told him.

“Oh, well, I guess I must have assumed with your studies. You were in university, right?”

My stomach twisted. That was a loaded question.

“Yeah, I was. I believe I have to thank you for the grant that paid for my first semester.”

The slightest curve of a smile graced his lips and he nodded.

“That program was completely online, except for a couple of summers where I had to do clinicals on the parent campus,” I explained.

“So, you graduated?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I finished the program in three years. I took summer classes. But you can’t be interested in whether I finished college or not.”

He sat back, resting his wrists on the table. The slight grin turned into a full smile.

I plastered a fake smile on my face and tried to breathe. It was really hard when his smile sucked all the air out of the room. I had tunnel vision and all I could see was him and that smile.

“It’s really good to see you. How long has it been?”

Six years, two months, and twenty-eight days. But who was counting?

“Oh, it’s been a while. What? At least five years?” I shrugged and pretended that I wasn’t painfully aware of exactly how long it had been since I had last seen his smile, heard his voice, looked into his eyes.



# KIRA

**S**ix years earlier

The smell of the lilies was starting to give me a headache. I liked the scent of flowers, and typically they never bothered me. But the lilies were strong, and it seemed like everyone wanted to make sure there were lilies in the arrangements for their graduates.

Roses were also a very popular request, but that was typical. Someone dies, send roses. Someone born, send roses. I was pretty sure half of the population of the world only knew one flower, a rose.

I twitched my nose and moved the stems around until the arrangement looked good to me. I checked the order again. Oranges, yellows and some hot pink, they wanted lilies. I had three large tiger lilies surrounded by a selection of yellow roses, and now I needed something to deliver a punch of pink.

“How’s that order coming Kira?” Cassandra stepped into the back to check on my work.

I had five stainless steel vases lined up and was filling orders. So many of the orders were redundant to each other, so I was building in bulk. It was a production line of floral arrangements.

Everyone wanted lilies, so down the row I went placing the flowers, three wanted roses, in they went one-two-three. I saved the personal touch for last. We never sent out identical mixed bouquets unless that was requested, like for a wedding party.

Since these were all being pulled together for the local high school graduation ceremony, I had to make sure they didn't look at all alike.

"Everything is going great, but the lilies are being mean. Is there any aspirin in the office?" I asked.

"I have some ibuprofen. Will that help?"

"Yes, please." I walked around from the worktable and followed her out to the front of the store.

She pulled a small, zippered pouch from under the register and pulled out a small bottle. "I keep bandages in here too. It's my mini first aid kit for when I'm at the register."

She poured two pills into my outstretched palm. I closed my fingers over the pills to keep them safe until I could head back and get my water bottle.

"Here are a few more orders. This one on top just called, it's for later today."

I took the stack of orders with my free hand. "Pick up or delivery?" It really made a difference in how much time I had. With a pickup, I could take up until the last second to work on the order. With a delivery, I had to give Peter at least an hour to drive the flowers to their destination.

"Pick up," Cassandra confirmed.

My gaze scanned the form. One word caught my attention, 'graduation.'

"Another graduation bouquet. When I started working for you, I thought Valentine's Day and June weddings would be busy times. Oh, and Mother's Day. I never thought of graduation as a flower day."

"We have busy days all year long, otherwise I couldn't stay in business." She laughed.

I hadn't exactly thought about it. She would have to make enough to buy flowers, run the shop, heck she had to pay me. I guess that's why she owned the shop and I just worked here, she thought about those things. I nodded and returned to the back of the shop to finish up the arrangements I had lined up

and were now waiting. After I tossed back the pills, I took a look at the stack of orders. I paused as I recognized Jenny Kilpatrick's name. We had gone to high school together. She was graduating from college. Wow, that was impressive. Good for her.

The next two orders were also for college graduation. We didn't have a local university. It was odd, I guess everyone was coming home at the same time.

If I had managed to get away and gone to university, I would be graduating this year. What an odd thought, me, getting out of here and doing something with my life. The scent of the lilies attacked my sinuses again, and I snorted and found a tissue to blow my nose.

What would I be doing if I wasn't jumping from job to job in this place? There were only so many places to work in Millers Glen. I hoped that by the time I found a guy and settled down, I hadn't worked at every single shop.

Was I too old to run away and join the circus or have some kind of adventure? The smell of the lilies started to feel scratchy, and my eyes got watery.

I no longer cared if the bouquets for the graduates all looked the same or not. This vase got yellow carnations and white roses, the next one got yellow roses and white carnations. That made them different. Was I going to be able to work here for the rest of my adult life? Would I be able to make it through the June wedding season with everyone but me getting married?

"Hey Kira, could you come out here?" Cassandra's voice pulled me out of the spiraling funk I was rapidly sinking into.

My breath hitched when I saw the man standing at the counter, smiling and talking with her. I had to swallow a few times before I could speak. He had that kind of thick hair that was so dark it gleamed blue. His features were chiseled and sharp. And he was tall, with broad shoulders that pulled at the seams of his dress shirt. Wow.

"Do you have an order to pick up? What's the name?" I asked.

He turned his smile on me, and my knees went weak. His hand reached out toward me.

He expected me to touch him, to shake his hand.

“Drake, nice to meet you.”

My pulse fluttered as I slid my hand into his. A shimmer of electricity danced over my skin, starting where we touched and worked its way up my arm.

“Drake,” I repeated. That was a nice name. It suited him, strong, masculine. And I didn’t have an order for any Drake.

I felt my eyes go wide as I looked at Cassandra in a panic. My stomach lurched and bile surged. I hadn’t forgotten an order once since I started. I was mortified that I had messed up this beautiful man’s order.

“It’s not that bad of a name,” Drake chuckled before releasing my hand.

“No, sorry, it’s. Um... I’m sorry... I must have misplaced your order. If you tell me what you were looking for, I can have something in ten minutes.” I tripped over my tongue. I could fix this; I could make it right. I liked the job I really did. I didn’t want Cassandra to fire me.

Drake held up both hands, palms out. “Whoa there. I’m not here to pick up any flowers. But now that you mentioned it, maybe I should grab something for my mom.”

My panic deflated like air being let out of a balloon. I was limp and floppy and felt as if I should be making rude noises. “No order?” I let out a heavy sigh.

“Drake is the son of a good friend of mine. He stopped by to pick up some fibers I promised his mother for her knitting.”

“Oh.” That explained the bags of yarn in the back. I knew Cassandra knitted. That all made sense.

“I just need you to watch the front. I think that the couple over there are going to either request a wedding consult or are going to put in an order. I didn’t want to leave them in case they had any questions.”

I nodded. I could mind the shop while she helped Drake take the yarn to his car. His mother must have been knitting sweaters for a small army. Cassandra had dozens of bags of yarn in the back.

I watched the couple for a minute or two. They didn't look like they were seriously shopping. If I had to guess, they were just looking to see what flowers we carried. If I cared, which I should, this was my job, I should go up to them and actually ask if they had any questions. But I didn't want to, because that would mean I would have to step away from the register. And from where I was currently sitting, I could just hear the deep timbre of Drake's voice. It was a rumble that continued the dance of electric buzzing through my system.

Some people came into the shop, it looked like a mom and her kids.

"Hi, welcome. Just let me know if you need anything," I called out.

The woman gave me a distracted wave and wandered around looking at our display shelves.

Someone else came in, and before I could offer my weak greeting, they barged right up to the counter.

"I have a pickup for Wilson. Hurry up, I'm late," they demanded.

"Okay, I can help you with that." I started to type their name into the computer.

"Why are you playing on the computer? Go get my order."

I ignored their rudeness and located their order in the system. They had one of the lily monstrosities I had finished putting together. "I'll be right back," I said as I slipped off the stool I had been sitting on.

"Your order is in the back. It will only take me a moment." I hurried into the back of the shop.

I was not prepared to see Drake leaning on the worktable as Cassandra bustled about pulling flowers together.

"Excuse me," I said.

“I’m between you and your flowers, aren’t I?” he asked.

He was hot, his voice was sexy, and I just nodded like a starstruck idiot.

He shifted and I reached out and grabbed the first bunch of flowers I could. I did not look at the job tag. I wanted to get away from Drake before I did something epically stupid.

“Here you go,” I announced as I presented the order.

“You’ve got to be kidding me? That’s not my order. You can’t even get a simple bunch of flowers right, can you?” Mr. Wilson wasn’t going to be happy no matter what I did.

“I’m sorry, did you not have a graduation order with tiger lilies?” I asked. Crap. In my Drake induced panic I must have grabbed the wrong thing. “Let me go check the order. I’m so sorry.”

I turned to see Drake carrying a different order toward me, the one with the hot pink daisies. “I overheard, and noticed this one had the Wilson name on the tag. Is this the correct order?”

Mr. Wilson complained some more, paid, took his flowers and left the shop.

That’s when I heard the sniffles. I looked behind one of the displays to find one of the kids that had come in with the mom. But I didn’t see the mom.

“Hey kiddo, where’d your mom go?”

The little boy shrugged. I picked him up and put him on the stool next to the register.

“I’m Kira. This is Drake. Drake is going to hang out with you for a second while I go get your mom. Aren’t you, Drake?”

I couldn’t believe I had the nerve to order him about. I didn’t give him time to respond before I turned and dashed out the door. I had barely hit the sidewalk when the frantic mother rushed past me. When I followed her into the shop, she had the kid in her arms and was profusely thanking Drake for finding her son.





## DRAKE

**H**er name was Kira. I liked the sound of it, it was as pretty as she was. And she was pretty, and smart. I kept thinking of how she handled that cranky old man and the lost kid. She never once panicked. Not once. I particularly liked the way she blushed and smiled when she looked at me. It had been a while since I so obviously flustered a woman.

“That’s the last of it,” Cassandra said as I put the last of the yarn in the trunk. The back seat was also completely full of yarn. “Your mother is an angel. Tell her to let me know if she needs help getting this all handed out. I can let her borrow Peter. He’s a great delivery boy.”

The trunk clicked shut. As soon as I got to the house, Mom would take the yarn and sort it and have it delivered to a bevy of more volunteers. And all of them would knit up blankets and scarves for the local homeless shelters for the winter.

And she was doing this in the middle of Dad and Uncle James trying to get us all relocated into the city. Everyone was trying to get too much done in a short amount of time.

It made perfect sense for me to meet someone now, knowing when I didn’t have the time to get involved. When I would be leaving sooner than later.

“So, your employee, Kira, she seems nice,” I said.

“Oh, she’s delightful. And too smart for her own good. Sometimes I wonder if not a mother having to watch out for has pushed her into being so responsible at such a young age,” Cassandra said.

I paused. How old was Kira? I had been under the impression she was in her mid to late twenties.

“Is she still in school?” I asked.

“Poor girl never got a chance to go. She would do great things if she went to college. Smart as a whip that one.”

I thanked Cassandra for the yarn before leaving. Back at the house, I found one of Mom’s assistants to empty my trunk and back of my car and haul all of the yarn into Mom’s project room. It looked like she was staging for some kind of crafty invasion.

“Oh, good, you’re home. Drake, I’m going to need you to—”

I threw up my hands to stop her. “Nope, stop. You know I love to help you out when I can.”

I crossed the floor littered with piles of yarn in every color of the rainbow. And in the spaces that didn’t have yarn, there were tubs of long knitting needles. I gave Mom a kiss on the cheek.

“But I am also in the middle of getting assets in line for Dad’s deal with Uncle James, and I have my own issues to deal with.” I wasn’t about to tell her I met a woman who was going to occupy my every thought until I knew more about her.

As it was, the freckles and blush across Kira’s little nose and cheeks was taking over in my mind. I wanted to, no, I needed to see her again. And that meant I couldn’t give what little spare time I had to my mother’s cause. I had my own, Kira.

I gave myself a day, twenty-four hours to make sure that I wasn’t simply overreacting to having a pretty woman smile at me. I wasn’t prone to this level of response, so I thought that taking a step back would give me clarity. It pinpointed my desire to see Kira again into a singularity of desire.

I walked into the floral shop the next day, expecting to see Cassandra at the counter. My pulse quickened when instead, I saw Kira.

“Let me know if you need any help,” she called out without looking away from what she was doing. She had an armful of

different flowers, and she sorted them into a display wall of vases. One flower at a time.

“Thanks, I will,” I said as I made my way over toward her.

She glanced up, and that delightful pink blush spread across her cheeks again. “Oh, hi Drake. Cassandra isn’t here.”

“That’s all right, I came in to see you.”

“Me?” She was totally taken aback. She stopped putting the flowers into their appropriate vases and gaped at me. “Why me?”

She was cute. “We should go get coffee.”

“I can’t. I’m at work.” She proceeded to place flowers, one at a time into the vases.

“I meant when you get off work. Or will Cassandra give you a break when she gets back?”

She smiled. It crinkled up her nose slightly.

“I get off at six thirty,” she said.

“Perfect. Meet me at Yuri’s Diner. I’ll buy you dinner.”

“I can buy my own dinner. But I’ll let you pay for the pie and coffee.”

I chuckled. She thought she was going to boss me around. “Yuri’s, be there at seven. I’ll let you pay for your own hamburger.” I could humor her. She’d forget by the time we were finished with dinner.

She was prompt. I liked that in a date. She didn’t keep me waiting while she changed or otherwise primped for my benefit. She looked good in jeans and the floral shop polo. She had the kind of figure that would be amazing in a dress. The shorter the better in my opinion. I liked legs. And from what I could tell of Kira’s in those tight jeans she wore, she had perfectly shaped legs.

“I didn’t keep you waiting, did I?” She tossed her bag into the booth first, then shrugged out of her zippered hoodie, and tossed that in before sliding in across from me.

I glanced at my watch. “Five minutes early.”

“Good, you haven’t ordered yet, have you?” Her gaze scanned the empty plate and the coffee mug in front of me.

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I had been here early and had a small snack while I waited.

“I’m starving. You don’t mind if I get a milkshake with dinner, do you?”

“Get what you want. I’m only paying for the coffee and pie, remember?”

She laughed. “That’s right. Good, then you can’t judge me and complain about how much money I’m making you waste.”

When the waitress came over Kira ordered a milkshake, French fries and onion rings, and a double cheeseburger with bacon. I learned many years ago never to comment on what a woman ordered or ate. That was between her and her bathroom scale.

“So, Drake”— she turned to me after placing her order— “why did you ask me for coffee?”

“I liked the way you handled yourself in a stressful situation. I thought I’d like to learn more about this woman who worked for Cassandra.”

She nodded. “Fair enough. How do you know Cassandra, and what was up with all of that yarn?”

“I thought this was my time to ask you questions,” I chuckled as her eyes went wide.

“Sorry, ask away.” She gestured over our empty table.

“How old are you?”

“You do know you legally can’t ask that during a job interview.”

“What makes you think this is a job interview?” I countered.

She shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe to comment about how I handled a stressful situation at work. If this isn’t a job

interview, then you need to answer my questions, because that's how conversations work."

She was feisty.

"In coming," our waitress said as she stopped at our table with her arms loaded up with plates. The table was full of food by the time she was done and left.

I watched Kira take her burger apart and place the onion rings between the meat and the buns, on both sides as I talked.

"Cassandra and my mother are friends, they are part of an organization that gets blankets and scarves to places like homeless shelters, hospitals, and victim advocacy groups. They help to coordinate volunteers, materials, and they even do some of the knitting work."

"And you are a good son by helping out and picking up the yarn that Cassandra had collected."

I shook my head. "I don't know about that. Good son? That makes me sound like some kind of mama's boy. I also do asset trading with my father. Are you going to call me a chip off the old block?"

"Hey, there is absolutely nothing wrong with being kind and helpful to your mother. Not everyone has one, you're lucky. And I don't see anything wrong with having a relationship with your family. I live with my aunt. And she means the world to me, so yeah, I do things for her."

"Like what?"

"Like I take flowers home that Cassandra can't or won't sell. They are still pretty, and my aunt appreciates them." Kira took a large bite of her burger.

"What will your aunt do when you move out and go to school?" I asked. I still had no idea how old she was.

She shook her head. "I think that opportunity has long sailed into the sunset for me. I didn't have a chance to go right out of high school. And it's been a few years, I have financial responsibilities. I don't have the time or the funds."

“Clearly being a shop girl isn’t your dream job. What do you plan on doing then?”

“This is it, Drake. The plan is to work a job I don’t actively hate, and work for and with people who are not actively trying to catch me doing something wrong.”

“That sounds like the voice of experience.”

Her milkshake made that loud obnoxious sound as she sucked the very last bits out of the glass. She put the glass down and wiped her mouth as she nodded.

“The job before the flower shop was pure hell. I like kids, so I thought I’d be one of the teachers— that’s what they call the caregivers, it’s stupid we weren’t teachers, we were babysitters — and Kinder Land. It’s one of the big daycares in town. Anyway, the kids were so sweet. I loved them. The woman who ran the place was a nightmare. She was always trying to catch me doing something wrong. And she would put these elaborate set-ups into action, and then get mad when they didn’t work. I couldn’t take the stress any longer. I’ve been with Cassandra since just before Valentine’s Day. I could see myself working for her for a long time. Why are you so interested in my work goals if this isn’t some kind of job interview?”

“Maybe it was just a ploy to get you to go out with me?”

“Did it work? I mean, I’m paying for my own dinner.”

“You tell me. How old are you?”

“I guess it worked,” she said with a smirk. “But you should never ask a lady her age.”





## KIRA

“**Y**ou do this every year?” I asked Cassandra. We sat in the back room assembling matching arrangements for a big wedding. The shop didn’t open for an hour, and the wedding coordinator was scheduled to pick all of these up between two and four.

The bride’s bouquet was already done. It was a magnificent array of floral design. Cassandra was an artist. I thought I had mastered bouquet assembly in my first few months, but if there was one thing I learned during this past month of June, it was that I knew nothing when it came to floral design.

Cassandra laughed. “You didn’t complain nearly this much on Valentine’s Day and, trust me, we saw far more stems in that week than you have processed in the past six weeks.”

“I call boloney. Those were easy, everything was the same, red roses, and more red roses. These weddings have been insane. I thought it would be over by now, you know June wedding season is in June, not May through July,” I let out an exaggerated sigh. I wasn’t really upset, or complaining seriously, but it was nearly August, and we were still doing a lot of large weddings.

“If you haven’t figured it out by now, the wedding season is all year long.” Cassandra worked on a coordinating floral crown.

“That’s the truth. But I swear the summer weddings seem way more over the top.” I placed flowers in multiple arrangements that reflected the bride’s bouquet but were smaller. There were

twelve identical bride's maid's pieces that I assembled production line style.

"You'll love the fall wedding season. The colors are toned down a lot. Also, a lot more brides go the do-it-themselves route. They just order the flowers and take care of the arrangements themselves. The workload really calms down. You'd have time to do other things, than work for me all the time," Cassandra dropped the information like a bomb.

I stopped working on the bouquet in front of me and stared at her. I had to blink hard a few times as I felt tears prick my eyes, and the back of my throat started to feel tight. It took me a few false starts, but I could finally talk without sounding like I was going to cry.

"Are you firing me?"

"Not at all. I had been thinking that you would have time to go back to school if you wanted."

I sighed. Time would be nice, but school does cost. And I would have to relocate. "I don't think I would have that much time. Any spare time for studying would be spent in the car driving over to Fort Drum or Watertown. That would put a lot of extra wear and tear on my car. And I don't really have any savings in case I need to get it fixed."

I had thought about the entire school thing off and on for weeks, especially after Drake had brought it up that very first time, I met him.

How had I managed to go my entire life in this town, only to meet that man six weeks ago? He said he was from around here, but I got the distinct impression he was from one of those families that had multiple homes. And by home I meant mansion. But from everything Cassandra had said, Drake's mother had been around coordinating volunteer efforts for years.

I had thought something was going to come of that impromptu dinner date at Yuri's, but no such luck. I guess my healthy appetite and ample ass were not to his liking. I kept telling myself that was his loss, not mine. It didn't stop me from

flirting with him wildly whenever I ran into him. And after a lifetime of not knowing he existed, I seemed to be running into him everywhere.

“There are quite a few online programs you could consider. No driving,” Cassandra said, bringing me back to the conversation.

“Not to sound like I have an excuse for every possibility, but online classes still cost money. And they require computer equipment I simply don’t have. If there really is going to be a lag in my schedule, maybe I should look for a second job so you don’t have to feel bad for cutting my hours.”

Cassandra put the stems she was working with down and let out a sharp breath. “I’m trying to offer you the opportunity to go to college, and you keep saying no.”

She was upset with me.

“I’m not trying to be obstinate; I really am not. It’s not that I don’t want to go to school. But school costs money I simply don’t have. And my Aunt Angie doesn’t have that kind of money, or I would have been able to go after high school.”

“For goodness’ sake, Kira. I’m saying I’ll pay for it, well, at least part of it. I can reimburse you for your grades.”

“Oh wow, I didn’t realize that’s what you were saying.” I stopped and thought for a moment. “If you are willing to pay me back for my grades, I have to make the grades first, right?”

“Of course, don’t be silly. I can’t pay for grades you haven’t earned. I was thinking we could reimburse you ninety percent for As, eighty for Bs, and I’d be willing to pay sixty percent on Cs, but nothing for non-passing grades. You know, something to incentivize you to apply yourself.”

“That’s more than generous. But I’d still have to come up with the initial tuition fee. Maybe next year.” It was going to cost me over three grand. I would have to apply for all the student loans, and I doubted I qualified for any scholarships. I wasn’t a bad student in high school, just not the best. I didn’t have the kinds of grades that earned scholarships. With careful planning, I could save the money in a year. And I would

definitely apply myself to get that ninety percent paid back, because that would cover the next semester.

“Next year,” I repeated. “That would give me time to save up the initial tuition and fees. I might even be able to find a scholarship, or a grant to help with the costs. And I could probably find a good used computer. I don’t have time to do all of that before the semester starts. Classes start at the end of August. That’s less than a month away. Can I accept it for next year? That’s assuming you will extend the offer until next year.”

“I can do that. I like that instead of turning it down outright, you came up with a plan. That’s why I think you would do well getting a degree. You’re smarter than you give yourself credit,” Cassandra told me.

I smiled. I liked that my boss thought I was smart. Too many people in my youth didn’t think I was very smart. I liked to think that it was because I wasn’t fully developed as a human. I was a stupid kid; I didn’t have prospects or goals. Why should I? It takes money to pursue dreams, and I didn’t have any back then. I didn’t have much money now, but at least now I understood that I could take small saving steps, and as time progressed my savings would grow.

“You keep going on those bride’s maid’s pieces. I need to open the shop.” Cassandra announced as she pushed to her feet.

I continued to work and thought about her offer of paying for college. That was huge and would be really helpful. Would she require that I study business or botany? Going to school would mean I had to figure out what I wanted to study. What did I want to be when I grew up?

I was lacing taupe and pale pink ribbons over the base stems of the last of the bride’s maid’s bouquets when Drake crashed into the back of the shop.

I looked up at all the noise he made.

“What do you mean you aren’t going to take Cassandra’s offer of paying for college?”

“Hello to you too,” I said before returning to my careful braiding. With the bow secured, I picked up the hot glue gun and placed a bead of glue under the knot, and then pressed down, securing the bow into place.

“Seriously Kira, do you want to play with flowers and glue guns for the rest of your life?”

I didn’t understand why he was so upset.

“Cassandra does, and I don’t see you yelling at her about her life choices.” I pointed out.

“She owns the shop, you don’t.” He growled in his throat. His dark brows pulled together, and his eyes flashed with anger. If I wasn’t annoyed with his attitude, I might have even thought he looked really sexy, and tried to flirt with him.

Instead, he was just pissing me off with his bossy manner.

“You certainly didn’t waste any time getting all up in my business. Why were the two of you even talking about me?” I tossed my arms up and waved my hands in the air. “It’s not your concern, Drake.”

“She is willing to pay you back, and you are just going to leave that money on the table.”

I ignored him for the time it took me to carefully wrap and place the bouquets in the carry box. Part of me wanted him to just leave, and hoped he would go if I stopped talking. He was still there when I was done.

I huffed out my annoyance. “Fine, I’m leaving money on the table. That’s my decision to make, not yours. Maybe that money on the table”— I gestured at an imaginary pile of money on the worktable— “is going to cost me.”

“It’s an investment in your future Kira.”

I looked him directly in his eyes. But before I made eye contact, I couldn’t help but notice he wore an expensive wristwatch, the kind the manufacturer called a time-piece. His shirt was pressed and starched the way that a cleaning service did it, not the way an iron at home did. His shoes were

designer, and the jeans he wore easily cost a couple of hundred dollars, if not more. He wouldn't understand.

“I'm not going to argue with you about how I do or do not spend my money. I discussed my situation with Cassandra, who made the offer. Not you, because this really isn't any of your business. I much prefer you flirting with me than telling me what I can and can't do, like you have some say in my life.”



## DRAKE

**W**hy couldn't Kira see that she was throwing away a golden opportunity? She stormed out past me, carrying the large box she had been packing. With a shake of my head, I slowly made my way back to the front of the shop.

"Sounds like she didn't see things your way." Cassandra laughed at me.

She had told me Kira was stubborn, but I felt certain that if Kira understood what she was giving up she would see that going to college was in her best interest. I crossed my arms and watched as Kira helped someone load boxes into a car in front of the shop.

"I told you, we talked about it. She has a plan to start next year. There's no need to push her. You never know if that pressure will make her stick to her obstinate need of doing it herself. And then she'll never apply to that college," Cassandra continued.

"She's already lost time."

"There is no timetable for success," Cassandra said.

Maybe not, but there was such a thing as hire-able time frames, and employers wanting to know how and why certain milestones were not made at expected times.

Before I had a chance to respond, Kira came back inside. She glared at me as she walked past. She lifted her pert little nose and sniffed at me.



I spun on my heel and followed her into the back. This situation needed to change.

“Go out with me tonight,” I demanded.

“Why? So, you can continue to berate me over this college thing? I don’t want to go out with you simply to give you an opportunity to lecture me. I do want to go out with you, but to flirt and talk about, oh I don’t know. How about anything other than why I’m not in college?”

I couldn’t do that. If I took her out it would be to ensure she had a future path established, and then to kiss her, to touch her. I didn’t want to go to the local sports bar and talk about nothing important and drink cheap beer.

“Kira, I’m going to step out for a bit with Drake. You don’t mind watching things upfront now that the big wedding order has been picked up, do you?” Cassandra barely stepped into the back and gave me a stern look.

We did not have an appointment for anything. I was here simply to find out if Kira had accepted the offer or not.

My gaze went from Cassandra back to Kira. She was clearly angry with me and staring at me with rounded eyes, as if she was expecting something from me and I wasn’t delivering.

When I didn’t say anything, Kira turned her attention to Cassandra. “Sure, not a problem. I can finish cleaning up back here later.”

She brushed past me again, this time she harrumphed. I really could do without her attitude.

Cassandra walked past me in the opposite direction. “I’ll be right back.”

It was only a moment before Cassandra was back, a purse hanging off her shoulder. “Shall we?”

I gestured for her to lead the way.

Kira sat at the register, obviously ignoring me. Fine, two could play at that game.

As I was about to step outside, she called my name.

“Drake, I’ll be at the Dug Out tonight, if you change your mind.”

A sports bar, of course she would be there. I nodded before letting the door swing closed behind me.

“You know you could just ask her out instead of trying to trick her into doing something she clearly has opinions about.” Cassandra looped her arm around my elbow.

“Where are we going?”

“For a chat. I feel like something fundamental is missing here, and I could talk to your mother about it, but I’m under the impression she wouldn’t know what I’m talking about.”

I chuckled. “And why’s that?”

“Because when I asked her if she had a chance to meet Kira yet, she did not know who I was talking about. So that means you haven’t mentioned Kira to her.”

“Why would I tell my mother about Kira?” I asked.

“Seriously Drake? The two of you are about as transparent as glass. You’ve been in my shop simply to sit around and talk to her while she’s working. I think I could count the times you’ve been in my shop prior to meeting Kira on my left thumb. And she is obviously smitten with you. I thought you had been out on a few dates, but now I’m not so sure.”

“She’s young,” I started.

“Not too young, as you keep mentioning whenever you bring up the school thing.”

We paused at the corner and waited for a car to drive by before we crossed the street.

“It’s complicated,” I admitted.

“Everything is complicated.”

“Mom is getting everyone ready to relocate to the city. Dad and Uncle James have almost secured the assets we need. Once everything is in place I’m leaving here.” I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Cassandra turned to look at me. I continued. “You’re right, I do like Kira. She’s a spitfire. I hate

to see her wasted as a shop girl. She vibrates with potential. I'm not going to be around to influence her. And even if I wasn't moving, you know how my mother is about education. Kira would never be good enough for her." My parents would never let me hear the end of it if I brought a younger, uneducated woman home for them to meet. They would be purposefully rude and arrogant snobs. I didn't want to subject Kira to that treatment.

Cassandra slowly nodded her head. "I think I get it. Miranda would make a relationship between you and someone like Kira miserable. But you could introduce Kira to your mother if she were taking classes, or already graduated."

I shrugged. She had basically nailed the situation down.

"Drake, I'm going to be blunt. You're an adult, you should be able to navigate this without all the subterfuge and hiding from your parents."

"I agree. Unfortunately, my career is tied up in family matters. It's the only clear way I see of making sure Kira is someone I can introduce to my mother when we head back in a few years. I'm thinking long term here."

Cassandra resumed her walk and pointed toward the bakery. I followed as she opened the door and stepped in. She chatted with the young woman behind the counter, asking him how his grandmother was before she ordered a coffee and a cookie.

"Do you want anything?" she asked. "My treat."

"A coffee would be good."

As we waited for our drinks to be made Cassandra picked the conversation back up. "If you want Kira to start sooner so she can graduate sooner, why not be honest about being the person paying her tuition?"

"Can you imagine how that conversation would go? She would knock it out of the air, and never consider going to school," I said. "Besides, I'd rather prefer this not get back to my father. He would see it as a bad investment, and he would make disparaging remarks about Kira as to my reasoning."

Cassandra nodded and then turned her attention to the girl behind the counter to take our drinks and cookies and pay.

“True, Kira can be stubborn. I just don’t know if making her think that I’m the one paying for all of this is a wise idea.”

“I don’t want her to feel obligated to me. Now how do we convince her that her initial tuition and expenses would be covered if she wanted to start immediately?” I followed Cassandra back out to the sidewalk.

“I still don’t see why you are so against letting her know.”

“If Kira knows it’s me, she might have expectations that I cannot uphold currently. Starting a relationship right now would be a very stupid thing for me to do. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us. While my intent is to someday come back, I can’t promise that will happen. And I can’t extend an invitation to her to come to the city. So, it’s simply best if she does not know I’m involved.”

Cassandra nodded before taking a bite of cookie followed by a sip of coffee. “Then you had best stop pestering her about it, or she will put two and two together. As you’ve said, Kira is a smart woman, too smart to be a shop girl. Okay, so how do we make this work?”

“What if you offer the tuition upfront?”

“I already said I would reimburse her for the grades. Won’t it be suspicious to suddenly change my education policy?”

“Do both,” I suggested.

She shook her head. “Then you’re just paying twice. There needs to be a better way.”

“I’m sure we can come up with something,” I said with a heavy breath.

There was a deadline that had to be met to get Kira starting classes, all while I didn’t know what the timeline was for leaving town. I would have preferred to stick around and start dating Kira, even in secret. I wasn’t going to start something with her only to break it off. My goal here was to have Kira, and that meant I was playing the long game this time.

I stopped when we reached the flower shop.

“You’re not coming in?” Cassandra asked.

“Best not. Kira is still angry with me.”

She nodded and pushed into her shop. I caught a glance of Kira through the front window.

I could easily walk into that shop and tell Kira I was going to take her out, and never once mention college. I would seduce her and woo her and make her want me in a way she never knew she wanted a man. And when I left for New York City, she would be clingy and desperate. And then she would hate me.

She was angry and if I pushed the college idea, she would hate me. Either way I ended up with Kira disliking me greatly, and that was not ideal. I wanted to leave her on good terms, without any promises I didn’t know if I’d be able to keep or not.

I took one last look at her. I couldn’t have her, not yet. But I could make sure she had opportunities that she otherwise would miss out on.



## KIRA

“G irl! I’ve been waiting all day for this news. Tell me!” Sunny demanded information from me the second she saw me across the bar. Half of everyone not watching the game turned to look, first at her, and then at me.

I smiled and did a little shimmy dance over to our regular booth. Sunny already had finished half her beer. And was working on a basket of chips when I slid into the booth.

“You want your regular?” Brittany, who worked at the Dugout, said and then she leaned against the table. “Well, are you gonna tell us your news or not?”

“You finally got laid by that hot guy you told us about,” Sunny suggested.

Laid? I hadn’t even kissed Drake yet and Sunny already had us having sex. I shook my head.

Brittany swatted at Sunny. “Did you get a promotion at work?”

“Brit, order up!” Her boss yelled from behind the bar.

“Hurry before George fires me,” Brittany prompted me.

“I got in! I start taking classes tomorrow!” I was so excited, I practically vibrated.

Brittany leaned in and gave me a quick hug. “I’m so thrilled for you. I need more details, but later. Okay?”

Brittany scurried off.

“But I thought you couldn’t afford the tuition, and needed a computer, and all that stuff,” Sunny said.

“I can’t. I couldn’t. But apparently Cassandra said that the floral business alliance she’s a member of had some kind of scholarship and she submitted an application for me. I thought I was going to have to wait a year!”

“You’re all enrolled and everything?” Sunny asked.

“Yeah. After she told me about the scholarship we sat down at the computer and filled out the application for the online program and I was able to pick out classes and everything. And the semester starts tomorrow so I haven’t missed anything.”

“Whoa, that’s crazy fast. I mean wasn’t it only last week you said she offered you tuition reimbursement if you wanted to go back to school?”

“More like two weeks ago. It’s all happening so fast. It would be stupid to not go for it, especially since it’s being handed to me.”

“Here’s your usual, and a backup for each of you.” Brittany slid three tall glasses of beer onto the table before scampering off to wait on other people. She was good at her job, and she knew us well. One beer was not going to be enough.

At that moment Drake walked into the Dugout. I had never seen him in here before. He made all the other guys look like cardboard cut-outs. He was larger than life and so incredibly good looking.

My pulse was already speeding along with the excitement of telling Sunny and Brittany that I made it into school.

I sucked in a breath. “Okay Sunny, I need you to be subtle. Look at the door. Do you see that guy?”

“Ooh, Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Hunky just walked in. I haven’t seen him here before. He looks familiar. Where do I know him from?”

“That’s him,” I stage whispered. I leaned over the table so I wouldn’t yell. “That’s the guy I’ve been telling you about. The one who keeps flirting with me at work.” I jumped out of the booth; I had to do something. “I’ll be right back.”



I threaded my way through the crowd until I was standing in front of Drake.

“Did you come in to flirt with me or lecture me about college some more?”

“Kira! I didn’t expect to see you tonight. So, I guess the answer is neither.” He smiled, and it sent all of my nerves on end.

“Well, you can’t lecture me. I start classes tomorrow.”

When he threw his arms open wide, I assumed he was happy for me and I went in for a hug. When his arms came around me, I realized this was probably really awkward.

Why had I hugged him? He wasn’t acting like he was planning on embracing me. All my fluttery nerves tried to curl up and hide in embarrassment.

“I knew you could do it,” he said.

There was a hint of ‘told you so attitude’ in his voice. He could be insufferable when he was right. And I bet he was right a lot. He probably thought he was right all the time.

Suddenly I felt stupid being excited about college, when he probably didn’t care. I needed to go.

“I have to get back to my friend.” I pointed vaguely behind me. “I’ll see you next time you come by the shop.”

I turned and ran away. I slid into the booth and tried to sink out of sight. That hadn’t been my best social interaction.

“So that’s your hot guy? Why do I know him? I’ve been staring at him while you were over there flirting, and I just cannot figure it out.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” I said.

“You were so totally flirting. So was he. I thought you were going to drag him over here after you hugged him.”

I leaned forward until my forehead hit the table. “That was so embarrassing. It felt all wrong. This is going to be one of those awkward moments that keep me up at night for the rest of my life. Like that time, I hugged one of the kid’s dad when I

worked at the daycare. He was doing some weird swooping big sports related style handshake, and I hugged him. Only I think this is worse,” I moaned.

“How is this worse?”

“It just is,” I whined.

“Oh, I know where I’ve seen him. He comes into the shop with this older lady all the time,” Sunny kept talking. She was still trying to figure out how she knew Drake, and I just wanted to pretend he wasn’t in the same bar as us.

“Older lady? Messy iron gray hair, dresses like a really rich old hippy?” I asked.

Sunny laughed. “Yes, her. She could be an aged rockstar from the seventies the way she dresses with those long flowing vests and the bellbottoms. Her thrift store game must be strong.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I didn’t think Cassandra thrifted anything in her life.

“The other day she had on a pair of flared jeans with embroidery up the sides. They looked old, like vintage.”

I chuckled. “Not vintage, expensive. Her entire eccentric look is insanely expensive.”

“I don’t believe you,” Sunny laughed. “Some of the things she wears look kind of old.”

“Rich people do weird shit like that. Pay a lot of money so something doesn’t look new. But they are some of the worst contributors to throw away consumerism. Why repair when you can replace?”

She shrugged, and I crammed a handful of French fries into my mouth. It was almost depressing how rich Cassandra was. I knew Drake was simply the same by his attitude and accessories. They moved in very different circles than I did.

I shouldn’t have a crush on him, shouldn’t flirt. Rich people didn’t mix with the working class, and that is exactly what I was.

“Wait a minute!” Sunny threw her arms wide, palms out, fingers splayed.

I stopped mid drink and stared at her.

“Old hippy lady is your boss. Hottie guy over there is the guy you’ve been flirting with, and...” She covered her mouth and stared at me wide eyed.

I put my drink down “What?”

“I think I just figured something out,” she said. Her hand still covered half of her face.

“Are you going to tell me or not?” I demanded.

“Okay, hear me out. You said the hottie flirt man was pressuring you to go to college.”

“Yeah, he was a bit of a jerk about it,” I said.

“But not so much of a jerk you stopped thinking; he’s incredibly hot and you want him to model his underwear for you before taking it off. Am I right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I think he’s super sexy. Get on with it.”

“Out of the blue your boss says she’ll cover the extra costs. You say sorry can’t and then all of a sudden there’s enough money to cover all of your expenses.”

I nodded. She had the gist of it.

“Where did the money come from, Kira?”

I shrugged. “Cassandra said there was a scholarship she filled out for me.”

Sunny’s eyebrows went all the way up to her hairline. “Oh really? A scholarship magically shows up in the past two weeks.” She shook her head. “Your boss and that man have been coming in to get coffee and cookies and they are always talking about how to make a large financial gift without being obvious about where it’s coming from. I bet they have been talking about your college money.”

“That’s one hell of a conspiracy theory,” I said. I sat back and took a long sip of my beer. The money had seemed to

conveniently appear just after I refused Cassandra's offer.

"Has your boss ever talked to you about tuition reimbursement? Ever?" Sunny asked.

I slowly shook my head. "Maybe? I'd remember that, wouldn't I? There was a lot she said when I started that I don't remember."

"So why only learn about it now, and pressure you to start this semester? You could have been saving for the past six months or so... see? Not so conspiracy sounding now?"

I let out a heavy sigh. Sunny was actually making sense. Had Drake somehow set me up to go to school? Cassandra hadn't ever talked about it, and then Drake swoops in and starts interrogating me about school, and...

"Maybe she only thought about it because Drake has been so insistent. There might be something to what you're saying. I need to go ask him."

I was out of the booth and headed straight back to where Drake leaned against the bar. I wasn't certain what I was going to say, but what I did say came as much of a surprise to me as it did to Drake.

"Would you like to have dinner with me next weekend?" I asked. I felt as bold and as confident as I could possibly be. A complete change from the embarrassed awkward girl that had tried to run away earlier.

"You want to go out?" His smile made my knees go weak.

"No, I'll cook. You come over at about seven?" I wanted to thank him properly for the tuition assistance, even if he was going to pretend it wasn't him. I grabbed a napkin from the bar, and leaning over the bar, grabbed a pen from the work counter. I wrote my address down on the napkin, folded it into a little square, and tucked it into the breast pocket of his shirt.

I was very much aware that my fingers grazed over his firm chest. I was just going to act like it didn't freak me out.

He placed his hand over the pocket and smiled. My knees wanted to liquify, but somehow, I managed to stay upright.

“I look forward to it.”

I spun on my heel and sashayed back to the booth. Once I thought he couldn't see me, I tried to melt into the woodwork.



## DRAKE

I climbed the concrete steps to the small house. It wasn't much, but I was impressed that Kira had her own house at her age based on what she made working at a flower shop.

I rang the bell and waited. It wasn't long before Kira opened the door.

I held out the box of chocolates I carried. "I thought it would be weird to bring flowers when you work at a flower shop."

She smiled and instead of saying anything she grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me down to her level. "Are you going to kiss me tonight or are you going to be a gentleman the whole time?"

I was a bit off balance, but I knew an invitation when it was handed to me. I kept leaning forward until our lips met. Her lips were sweet with a hint of tang from some wine she had been drinking. Her arms snaked around my neck.

I adjusted, bringing our bodies closer together. Kissing her was amazing, and possibly one of the worst ideas I had ever had. Getting involved with Kira right now wasn't possible. I was leaving town in a few days.

"Are you on the menu for dessert?" I asked.

"You brought chocolates," Kira reminded me.

"I did. There are many interesting things you can do with chocolates if you are adventurous enough."

She let out a delightful little giggle. "That almost makes me want to suggest we have dessert first. You don't have to save

room that way.”

I opened the box of candies and held it out to Kira. She looked up at me through her lashes and carefully selected one. She knew exactly what she was doing as she ran the candy over her lips before licking the chocolate from them. She took a careful small bite and held the candy out for me.

I took a small bite, and then sucked her fingers into my mouth.

I was rewarded by Kira sucking in a sharp gasp.

It was my turn. I placed one of the small square candies at the base of her throat. She let out small needful moans as I trailed my lips across her collar bone, licking a trail between her breasts before I claimed the chocolate. I kissed her, letting her taste the warm fudgy sweetness.

“Chocolates for dessert is a really good idea,” she said as her breasts heaved enticingly.

One button at a time, I unfastened her blouse, exposing her creamy skin to my hungry gaze.

“Where’s your bedroom?” I asked.

Without a word, Kira reached out for my hand and led me upstairs.

“Do you live here alone, or do you have roommates?” I wanted to know what the living situation I was dealing with was. She seemed too young to own a house full of old settled furniture.

“This is my aunt’s house. I live with her.”

“And where is your aunt this evening?”

“She is on a retreat with her church ladies’ group. I have the whole house to myself all weekend.”

Kira had planned this very carefully. Her room wasn’t oversized, and her bed looked like it was barely big enough to fit the two of us.

She closed the door behind her and leaned against the door. “I like this idea of dessert first, don’t you?”



I sat on the bed and kicked my shoes off. I couldn't stop moving forward, allowing her to seduce me. Even though this course of action was not in the best interest for either of us, I didn't want to stop. Didn't know if I could as long as Kira was there offering to share her body with me.

She crossed the space in three steps, and then she climbed into my lap. She was soft and warm. I dipped my head and placed kisses along the top of her exposed breasts. I slid one hand around the curve of her hips and began sliding her clothes from her shoulders with the other.

She squirmed and pulsed, and held my head against her. I freed the fastener of her bra. She released me long enough to pull the garment off, and then pulled my shirt over my head.

I lay back and pulled her down on top. Her breasts pressed against my chest. I held her chin and kissed her. I could still taste chocolate on her lips.

As I kissed her, I cupped one of her plentiful breasts. Her soft warmth filled my palm. The nipple was peaked and hard. It tickled my palm. I enjoyed the sensation for a moment before I captured the tight bud between my fingers and played with it.

She gasped.

The noises she made had my body tight and winding up. I was touching her, consuming her, and it wasn't enough. I braced my foot, grabbed a handful of her ass and flipped us both until I was on top.

I sat back on my knees and looked down at her.

Her lips were plump and pink, her eyes were glassy with desire.

I ran my hands over her skin. I wanted to touch every part of her. Hooking my fingers into the waistband of her pants, I paused. "Are we doing this?"

She thrust her hips up to be closer to mine. "Yes, can we? I want you. Don't you want me?"

"I definitely want you. I just wanted to be perfectly clear before we went any further."

She pushed up, leaning against one elbow. Her free hand ran down my abs, tickling, before gripping the button to my jeans. She pulled on my pants, rocking me back and forth.

“I want what you have in here. I want your cock out of your jeans and in my pussy. Is that clear enough?” She smirked up at me.

Damn her talking about me inside of her was hot. My cock throbbed and my balls clenched. I stood off the bed and dropped my pants, before I pulled her stretchy pants over hers. She dropped her knees to the side, exposing all of her sex to my eyes.

She was pink and ready. I was hard and in pain. Her folds were the only place I would be able to find respite from the ache of need that took over my senses. I crawled back onto the bed, and Kira welcomed me with open arms.

Her body was lush, her skin smooth. Even during the summer, she was pale compared to my sun-tanned skin. I skimmed my hands over every inch of her I could touch. Her fingers danced over my pecs and down my arms.

I held her face and kissed her as I pressed my thigh between her legs. Her pussy was slick as she rocked against my thigh. I positioned her legs around my hips and pressed forward. Her heat was welcoming. I surged against her, and my cock slid between her folds, joining us together.

As I thrust into her, I tasted and kissed her skin.

She mewed and rocked against me. Lifting her hips to meet me thrust for thrust. She cupped my cheek and offered up one of her full breasts to my lips. I sucked her taut nipple and kneaded the soft weight of the breast.

We moved together in a glorious rocking and throbbing action. I couldn't think of anything other than how to get more of her into my mouth, under my touch. I shoved my cock deep into her wanting to be as deep into her as I possibly could. I wanted nothing more than to be lost in her body, to be consumed completely.

Kira was just as lost to our lovemaking as I was. She whimpered with each thrust, panted as we worked against each other. We fought as our bodies raced toward the goal. I wanted this to last forever, as much as I wanted to reach the pinnacle, the orgasmic goal of all this thrusting and grunting.

Kira tipped over the edge first. The sounds she made got higher, and more frequent. I could feel her body clench harder, faster. The rocking of her hips tried to speed up, she lost the pattern first. She twitched and clawed at my back as she tossed her head back and cried out.

My cock was caught in her personal orgasmic storm. The clenching of her internal muscles sent me right over the edge with her. I roared as we crashed and spasmed together. I braced and froze in place, unwilling to succumb to the knowledge that this was monetarily over. The goal of touching her was reached. I wanted to stay joined together with Kira for a very long time.

I pulled her against my chest as I rolled to my side. We were both still panting from the exertion. She curled in against me and began drawing circles over my chest. I kissed her temple.

She yawned. “Thank you for bringing the chocolates.”

“Thank you for inviting me to dinner,” I chuckled.

She yawned again, and this time, I did too. I closed my eyes and drifted off.

It was a few hours later before I woke up. My arms were still wrapped around Kira, who was warm and perfect in my arms. Carefully I eased away from her. I found the bathroom and cleaned up before returning to her room and pulling my shorts and jeans back on. I picked up my shoes and grabbed my shirt.

I looked down at Kira. She slept peacefully. Her hair was a mess. She’d have a bit of a time combing it in the morning. My chest tightened with pride knowing that she would think of me and how we messed her hair up when she brushed it out in the morning.

“I shouldn’t have done this,” I muttered out loud.

Tangling with Kira right before I had to leave had been stupid on my behalf. I was leaving more than just an ideal of her behind now.

I leaned over and kissed her temple. “Goodbye, Kira.”

I pulled my shirt on as I headed down the stairs. Once downstairs, I turned and walked into the kitchen in the back of the house. She had made a simple meal, spaghetti, and a salad. Fortunately, it looked like nothing had been left on the stove to burn while we decided to have dessert first.

It took only a few moments to pack everything up and put it away. There was no need for her hard work to be left out to spoil.

I closed the door behind me and made sure it locked. Closing that door was more than just me walking out of Kira’s house. It was closing the door on my past. I had to go home and pack, I was leaving for New York the next day.



## KIRA

I lay perfectly still. I was alone in the bed, but I hadn't been alone when I fell asleep. Maybe Drake had been a dream.

But my body could still feel the way his fingers burned my skin. No dream, just a wonderful memory. I should move, get up. Find out where he had gone.

But I was good where I was. I drifted in and out of awareness. Only realizing Drake was back in my room when my heart sped up and the bed dipped. His hand skimmed over my arm.

And then he said those words. Those awful painful words.

This had not been a mistake. Nothing about the two of us had been wrong. How could he think that?

I held perfectly still, not wanting him to know I was barely awake. He kissed me before he left. Had it been a mistake?

I tried to rouse myself, make myself sit up and follow him. Question him on what he had meant. But I was still mostly asleep, and unable to do much of anything.

I didn't properly wake up for hours. My heart ached. As much as I had wanted his words to be a dream, I knew they weren't.

I was angry. Angry at myself for ruining perfectly good food by seducing him and leaving everything out all night. Angry at Drake for saying such a hurtful thing to me when he thought I couldn't hear him. What was it that went wrong?

I showered and put on comfort clothes. When I made it downstairs and to the kitchen, I was confused at first. It was clean. Everything had been put away. At first, I panicked that

Aunt Angie had come home in the middle of the night and cleaned up, but then I saw the box of chocolates on the middle of the kitchen table.

I collapsed into one of the kitchen chairs and cried. I didn't want to be his mistake. I didn't want to end up regretting everything that had happened. I had been trying to get him to look at me the way he had last night.

I wanted last night to be the beginning of something, not the end. Brushing my tears away I resolved to show Drake that our actions had not been something to regret. That I was not someone he would be ashamed of knowing.

I pulled out last night's dinner and reheated a serving of spaghetti. I was hungry, and I had homework to do. I couldn't sit around and be sorry for myself, not if I wanted to prove that I was worth his attention. Not if I wanted to prove that his secret gift of my tuition wasn't a mistake.

I did the homework, I attended the online lectures and participated in the online discussion boards. My first few weeks of classes were so busy I barely noticed that Drake didn't stop by the flower shop. What I mean is I actually went a few days in a row of not thinking about him because my mind was occupied by my reading assignments. And how was I supposed to analyze this novel I could barely understand?

But when I got my first A on my first essay, Drake was the one person I wanted to show off to.

"Look!" I waved a printout of my grade in front of Cassandra. I needed to show somebody that I earned an A.

Texting Sunny about my grade had felt very lackluster. Then again, she wasn't as invested in my education as I was.

"I thought I would show it to Drake. I knew he was interested in me getting into school. But, as soon as my classes started, I swear I haven't seen him. Now I feel like I must just be missing him."

I really hoped he wasn't avoiding me because of what he perceived as a mistake.

Our night together was becoming a fond memory, and nothing more. I kind of hated that. I had wanted more with him. But I didn't have time to focus on what could have been. I was too busy making sure I got all the work for my classes done, and still made it to work on time.

"You want to show your grades to Drake?" Cassandra asked.

I nodded.

"Well, I guess you could text them to him."

"I would but I don't have his number. I figure you could just tell him to stick around next time he comes in so I could see him."

Cassandra's expression was full of pity and sadness. She had the kind of look that meant something was wrong. I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach.

"What's happened?" I asked. My pulse quickened, and not in a good way.

"Didn't he tell you? His father's company needed them to relocate to the city. He's in New York now."

I shook my head. I didn't understand. If it was his father's job, that didn't mean Drake had to go too. Did it?

"Drake manages a portion of the family business. Their entire family relocated."

I just stared at Cassandra open mouthed. He was gone. Drake was gone and I had barely noticed.

How wrapped up in myself had I been? I was nothing more than selfish, self-centered, in vain, focused on only me and my needs. I had missed him. But in my pursuit of proving everyone, including myself, that I could succeed, I hadn't actually noticed anything unusual.

He had left town and I missed it.

He spent the night with me and then left town.

Suddenly I was hollow, there was nothing inside of me. "Oh, I didn't realize that. I need to go."



I walked out the front door of the shop. I didn't have a break scheduled or anything, I simply left. I don't know where I was going. I didn't pay attention. When I looked up to see where I was, I had walked to the playground behind the old elementary school. There were still kids there even though the school day was over.

I made my way over to the benches that surrounded the play structure and sank down. I continued to sink, putting my elbows on my knees and holding my head up with my hands. I felt numb. Drake couldn't even tell me he was leaving.

He manipulated and controlled my actions through some kind of scheme to make it look like he wasn't paying my tuition. And I had fallen for it, all of it.

I needed to think. What was I going to do? I could just drop out. That would show him he didn't have control over me. And I could probably get the money refunded. Right? Did it work that way?

I pulled my phone from my pocket and a few logins later I was on the school's website. According to the calendar I could still withdraw and not have it impact my transcripts. Okay. It wasn't the most ideal plan; I was having fun in my classes. I was learning so much.

But if I withdrew now, I could still save up my own money to pay for the first semester. And then Cassandra's tuition match would carry me through the next semester.

I punched in the numbers to the registrar's office.

"I have a question about tuition reimbursement for early withdrawal." I launched into my need as soon as the phone was answered.

"I can help you with that. What's your question?"

"The website says that I can withdraw from classes and not have it impact my records up through next Thursday. How would I apply to do that, and how soon would I get my tuition reimbursed?" I asked in a rush.

"Log into your student portal, on the My Academic tab select this semester. There's a dropdown menu under 'what I want to

do.' You can view grades, register, and withdraw from classes."

Everything could be done through the student portal. Why hadn't I thought of that?

"Great, thank you," I said.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yeah. Will the tuition reimbursement come to me, or do you send the money back to who sent it to you?" I asked.

"Do you mean will your student loan money go to you or back to the loan company?"

"Something like that."

"Typically, the money would have to go back to you. We don't have records of where the funds came from, just for which student the funds are associated with."

"Damn," I said under my breath. I had a private grant. I want the money to go back to Drake, I didn't want it. And I didn't want to have to track him down to throw the funds back in his face.

"But if you withdraw now, you wouldn't get a refund."

"What? What do you mean I wouldn't get a refund? If I'm not taking classes, why would I pay for them?" No!

"In order to get a refund, you have to drop classes in the first three days of the semester."

"That's not fair!" I complained.

"That's our policy."

"Okay," I said with a deep sigh. Their policy sucked, but it's what I was stuck with. I was stuck taking classes. I was stuck with Drake's money. "Thanks for the information."

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Not unless you can change the school's policy," I tried to chuckle as I hung up.

That wasn't helpful at all. I lifted my focus to the playground. Now what was I supposed to do?

My phone rang.

Oh shit, it was Cassandra.

“Hi,” I said sheepishly.

“Are you okay, honey? You looked a little lost when you walked out of here,” she said.

“Sorry about that. Am I fired?”

“No, but maybe next time you might want to say something before you leave like that.”

“I will. I’m headed back now. I’m sorry. I had been so excited to show Drake my grades, and he never told me he was leaving.”

“You had a little crush on him, didn’t you? He’s a charmer, I don’t blame you,” she said.

I pushed to my feet and started walking. “I guess you could say that.” I didn’t know if I would call what I felt for Drake a crush. I somehow simultaneously hated him and adored him.



## DRAKE

I looked out over the city from the window in my new office. The view from up here was impressive. I might even consider it amazing, if the weather outside wasn't so miserable. Funny how the rain seemed to move in when I had to leave Kira behind.

The more it rained, the more I missed that summer beauty. And that's what she was, had been. A shining bit of summer memory that was getting lost the further along we got into fall.

I sipped my coffee and watched traffic and people move below me, like bugs so far away. Light reflected in splashes up the glass sides of the buildings. I barely saw it. I kept thinking of the last time I saw Kira all soft and asleep. Her hair spread across her face in a web of silky strands.

I knew better, and I had fucked up. I went to her place with the intention of wishing her well and telling her I was leaving. She was asleep when I said goodbye.

I let out a deep breath and turned to face my office. The space was large and luxurious. The furnishings were dark and expensive. It had to be comfortable, I was expecting to spend a good portion of my life in these walls. Failure was not an option. There was no going back and changing how I acted, what I said or did. I was here now and that meant moving forward. I had to make a success out of these asset acquisitions so I could return to Millers Glen and Kira in time.

The buzzer on my desk sounded. I glanced from it to my door. With another sip of coffee, I strode to the door.

“Do you need me?” I asked as I stepped out to my administrative assistant’s desk. Her desk was set up in the open space before my office door. My father’s and my uncle’s offices had a receptionist in front of a set of doors. Behind those doors sat their respective assistants, and then another set of doors into their individual offices.

My assistant was her own gatekeeper and receptionist.

“Do I need to show you how the buzzer on the phone works?” Andrea asked with a chuckle.

“No, it was closer for me to walk to the door than it was to get to my desk.”

“Staring out the window again?”

I didn’t have an answer for her. I stared out the window a lot. “It helps me to think.” I stepped in closer to her desk. “What have you got for me?”

“You wanted me to set up an appointment with your bank regarding some grant. I have you confirmed for this afternoon with Violet Hayes.”

Andrea scribbled a note onto a notepad. She tore the sheet off and handed the paper out to me. It had the bank’s name, the time, and Violet Hayes underlined three times.

“I will be there on time,” I said.

“It’s after lunch, and I know how much your father and uncle like their lunch meetings. You included.”

Dad and Uncle James did like to take extended lunch meetings. We were able to brainstorm and get a lot of the think-tank work done over a good meal. I left every single one of those meetings hours later with a task list.

I folded the sheet in half and put it in my breast pocket. The napkin with Kira’s address on it crinkled as I added the new appointment reminder. I couldn’t seem to get rid of that one little reminder that my memories of her spunk were real.

“I’m not meeting with them today, so I will be sure to grab a deli sandwich and be on time. Have you got anything else for me since I’m out here?”

She shook her head. “Not currently, but that always changes, doesn’t it? You have a conference call in twenty minutes.”

I groaned. “That’s exactly why I was staring out the windows again.”

“The view never gets old, does it?” she asked rather wistfully.

“It doesn’t. That’s why it helps me to think. I can stare at the same buildings, at the same streets, but there are always different people, different traffic patterns. At one point this morning the entire street was nothing but taxi cabs in both directions for two blocks. It was solid yellow. It’s a different perspective on the same old thing.”

“And isn’t that exactly what you’re supposed to be doing? Finding new perspectives?”

“Yes, it is. Change the perspective on asset management. I need to get ready for this conference call.” I left her desk and strode back into my office.

The conference call could have been an email. It took entirely too long to accomplish what needed to happen. But the contact seemed pleased with the results and action plan we ended with. I took time after the meeting to log my notes and get all the items gathered for the file. I would pass the information along to my father, he or Uncle James would redirect it to the appropriate management group.

If I wanted to get lunch before I met with Ms. Hayes, I needed to get moving. I don’t know why I decided to walk in this weather. The constant drizzle had me darting down the street as if I could dodge rain drops. I got a couple of hot dogs from a corner vendor and continued my walk. Eventually I settled in with my coat collar up around my neck. I was going to get wet no matter what I did. That decision had been made when I didn’t immediately call for a car or hail a taxi.

Stepping into the bank, I shrugged out of my wet coat and ran my hand over my hair. I slicked it back, It would curl up on the ends as it dried. So, my hair suffered the consequences, but I was invigorated by the brisk walk and the cool sharp air that came with the rain.

With my coat over my arm, I stepped up to the information desk and told them I was here for Violet Hayes. I was directed to a bank of leather chairs to wait in.

Violet was nothing that I expected. The women in banking I had met tended to be more severe, all business. Violet was the opposite. She had on a typical blazer, but instead of a suit, she wore it on a flowing floral dress. Her dark hair swung around her shoulders in soft waves.

“Mr. Schriver? Come on in and have a seat.”

“Calle me Drake. Mr. Schriver is my dad, or my uncle.”

I took the seat she indicated across the desk from where she sat in front of a computer.

“So Drake, I understand you want to set up scheduled grant payments from your trust?”

“That’s exactly what I want to do.”

Violet smiled and lifted her eyes to meet mine. The feeling in my chest was fuzzy and sharp at the same time. Time slowed; my heart sped up. Everything was a contradiction to itself. I felt like I suddenly started sweating from the heat, but a shiver ran over my entire body.

She blinked, long and slow. Her lashes swept down to spread across her cheeks like perfect fans, before lifting and revealing large languid doe-like eyes. Instantly I fell into their depths. I could see my entire future in her eyes.

“I need to make tuition payments to a business partner. I’m helping her granddaughter with a little private scholarship.” The story flowed out of my mouth as if it were the truth. But I didn’t want to tell Violet that I was helping a cute girl I had a ridiculous summer crush on to go to college. Not when my memories of Kira were dissipating in Violet’s presence. And my motivation seemed trivial at best.

“Have dinner with me,” I demanded.

Violet giggled. “I’m not supposed to fraternize with clients.”

“Then quit your job, or I’ll pull all of my accounts. It doesn’t have to be a date; you can tell me all about interest saving



plans. Call it a business meeting but have dinner with me tonight.”

“I could tell you all about longer term certificates as an investment option and the hazards of crypto currency.” She smiled and a slight blush turned her cheeks pink.

“Yes, please. I need to learn all about crypto.”

“Fine,” she said. “I can help you navigate the dangers of crypto over dinner. But first I think we need to go over what your needs are for meeting this tuition situation.” She tucked a strand of silky dark hair behind her perfect ear and pulled out a desk calendar.

She turned the page and began talking about dates. She was able to research the school’s online calendar and began to cross reference when my trust should send the grant payments.

“If you could make the payments directly to the school, it would save a lot of time,” she suggested.

“I didn’t know I could do that. I thought the grant had to go to the beneficiary directly. Something about not being able to make institutional donations designated for individuals.”

When I started this process with Cassandra, I had simply transferred the funds. After speaking with my banker in Millers Glen, I realized there was a better way of handling this, and thus this meeting with Violet. Having the funds come directly from my trust and not have to be processed through my accounts and Cassandra’s banking system supposedly would save us both on related fees.

Violet was focused on her computer for a while. I stared at her as she worked. Her nose was perfect, as was her profile, and the one delicate ear I could see. Every now and then, she would cast her eyes in my direction and smile.

Dinner was entirely too long to wait.

She turned with a smile. “Well, it looks like if we can get the recipient’s name and social security number, we can have the checks issued directly to the college on their behalf.”

My gut clenched. I didn't want Violet knowing about Kira. It wasn't as if she were my ex, or some dirty little secret. She was a bump in the road that I encountered. I could see a real future with Violet, one where I didn't have to justify anything about her to my parents. Once where I didn't have to explain a favor I did for a friend. Not even a friend, really, but an obligation I set for myself.

"I don't think that's going to happen. What if instead of sending payments over the next four years, I just sent a single transfer of funds for the full amount?"

"That's definitely an option," Violet said.

"Good, do that, then I can fire you as my banker for this, and you can date me."

She laughed, and my body reacted to that sound. It was a good sound.



# KIRA

**P**resent

I practically ran home. I couldn't get inside from the chill fast enough. It had seeped into my bones even more so after having left the cafe. Had I become more susceptible to the cold once I had a warm drink inside or had the shiver of seeing Drake again left me vulnerable?

Once inside I stripped off my inadequate puffer jacket, and pulled off my boots, hopping on one foot until my foot was free. I grabbed one of the quilts from the back of the couch and stood over the floor register wrapped in the blanket. The heat coming out of the vent was captured by the blanket and did a good job of warming me up.

"You're stealing the heat for the rest of us," Aunt Angie said as she walked through the TV room and past me.

"I need it more. It's freezing out there."

Aunt Angie turned and looked out the front window and shivered. "It's not freezing, it's just damp. That makes everything feel colder."

"Damp, windy, and cold," I confirmed.

"You want a hot chocolate?"

Aunt Angie was my great aunt, my grandmother's sister. My grandmother died before I was born, so when my mom couldn't care for me due to unfortunate personal choices, Aunt Angie took me in and raised me. She was my only family, and for all that mattered, my emotional mother.

“I would love one.” I followed her into the kitchen. I wrapped the quilt around me tighter, and created a cocoon that I tucked my feet into, and I sat criss-cross on the chair. It required some balance to sit that way, but I wanted all of my limbs tucked into the warmth of the blanket.

She microwaved a mug full of water and tore open a packet of instant hot chocolate.

“Two packs please,” I requested.

“The instructions say you only need one. There’s too much sugar in there for two,” Aunt Angie replied.

“Yeah, but the instructions also tell you to use milk, not hot water.”

“Too many calories—”

“I’m shivering off any calories I have right now. I don’t care about that.” I got off the chair, much to my misery and discomfort, and grabbed a second pack out of the box. If I was going to drink hot chocolate made with water, at least, I wanted it to taste like chocolate.

I bundled back up and thanked Aunt Angie for the cup before I dumped a second packet in. I held the warm mug with both hands. I had the kind of chill that I didn’t think I would ever recover from. I wasn’t certain it was from the weather, or from seeing Drake.

“How did it go?” she asked as she sat across the table, her own mug of hot chocolate— only one packet— in hand.

I had no idea how it went. My reality dropped out from under my feet seeing him again. He acted like it was no big deal, like he hadn’t turned my world upside down and abandoned me.

“The job interview, Kira, how did it go?” Aunt Angie asked again.

“Oh right, that was a mitigated disaster.”

“Oh, was it that bad?”

I nodded. “They weren’t interested in me. It was clear that they were looking for someone within. I was the scapegoat

from the outside world so they could prove to their decision makers that they had interviewed outside candidates. I tried to look professional and stylish for them, only to realize I was there to check off a box so they could hire someone else.”

“Are you certain that’s what was happening?”

I nodded. “It’s starting to become a pattern with the interviews I’ve been able to get. I have the qualifications, but not enough experience. Or they can’t stop telling me they are also looking at candidates from within their organizations. I really was hoping this would be a good fit, especially since they are in town, and I wouldn’t have to commute.”

“You’ll find something. I know you will.” She stood and placed her empty mug in the sink.

I took another sip. Two packets almost made the instant drink mix taste good.

“I wish Cassandra was still around. I would go back to work for her in a heartbeat.” Three years into my degree program, Cassandra decided to pack her things and close the shop to move to Vermont. I had offered to run the shop for her, since she wasn’t going to be terribly far away. But she declined, and I wasn’t in a position to buy the shop. I haven’t had a stable job since.

“You’d waste your degree working at a flower shop?” she asked.

“I’m beginning to think my degree was a waste of time anyway.” I hated to think I wasted time and money getting a degree that I wouldn’t end up using.

“Well, have you considered looking in Albany, or even going into the city?”

I let out a whiney groan. “I don’t want to leave Millers Glen. I’m not a city girl. I should be able to find a job here that lets me use my degree in child development that’s not being a nanny. Besides, you’re here and you need me to help out.”

“I wouldn’t like you to use me as an excuse to hold you back,” she said.

“You aren’t holding me back.” I wiggled out of my cocoon and took a few steps around the table to hug her. “You took care of me when I was little when you didn’t have to. It’s my turn to take care of you. It is what family does. Speaking of family, where’s Landon?”

I adjusted the quilt about my shoulders and wandered over the fridge and opened it. I removed a gallon sized zipper bag of seasoned chicken I had prepared earlier. The chicken had been defrosting in the fridge all morning.

I continued to bustle about the kitchen, grabbing a can of green beans, and pulling out the pots I needed to cook.

“I sent him next door to play with Candace’s grandkids. Her kids are in town for a quick visit. She’ll send him home before dinner,” Aunt Angie answered. “You know she used to be a teacher. Maybe she knows someone on the school board you could contact.”

As far as I knew I had contacted everyone on the school board. They currently didn’t have openings for early intervention specialists or reading specialists— the two areas I have focused on in school.

“Have you thought about being a teacher?”

I let out a disappointed chuckle, there was no humor in me. “I’ve applied. I’ll probably end up doing substitute work again this semester,” I said.

“I was thinking you could be one of those online tutors. You could teach English to little kids in East Asia.”

I didn’t want to teach English to kids half a globe away. “I already looked into that. I would have to get up at four in the morning.”

“It would be a job in your field. If you need experience to get a better job, Kira, you’re going to have to swallow your pride and take a position you don’t necessarily want.”

I kind of hated how right she was.

“Okay, I’m going to go change and then I’ll start cooking,” I announced before heading upstairs.

I didn't want to get my good interview outfit dirty. Not that I expected to have any more chances at wearing it again.

I looked at the outfit spread out on the bed as I slid into a pair of warm sweatpants, and pulled an oversized long-sleeved shirt on, and then a sweatshirt over that. Right now, layers of warmth were my friend. I was going to need to revamp my interview outfit.

I couldn't do another day like today where I put looking cute over being warm. I rubbed my arms, trying to ward off the chill that still clung to my bones. At least I had looked cute when I ran into Drake.

I couldn't believe Drake was back in town. How was I supposed to navigate through my life knowing I could bump into him at any point in time?

I crossed the hall into the bathroom and washed my face, wiping my makeup off. I laughed when I looked in the mirror. This was what I looked like most of the time, tired and in my comfy clothes. The interview outfit, the makeup, that was a costume I put on for the rest of the world. Maybe that's why I wasn't getting anywhere with my job hunt, everyone could tell I was hiding behind some kind of mask.

I made my way downstairs. I could hear Landon banging around and making noise. I guess the neighbor sent him home. I didn't blame them; he could be a handful. But he was my handful.

"Mommy!" He tackled me as soon as I stepped into the TV room, some blue dog cartoon was on.

I ruffled his hair. It was dark and full of loopy curls, just like his father's. That was going to be another fun topic to dodge until I could figure out how to bring that up. Or maybe I could do what I had been doing for the past six years.

I never confessed to Sunny or Brittney what happened between Drake and myself. And I certainly hadn't told them, or anyone, who Landon's father was. Why start now?

"Did you have fun?" I asked.



“They have one of those Twist video game systems. They let me play on it. Can we get one? It was so much fun. Please, Mommy?”

I bent over and kissed the top of his head. “Maybe you should ask Santa for one. But you have to be a good boy for Aunt Angie.”

I was very pleased to know that’s what he wanted. I already had one hiding in my closet, all wrapped and waiting for Christmas morning. I had spent six months setting aside a little extra in savings to buy the gaming system. I knew it was popular with slightly older kids. I wasn’t sure if it was the right thing for Landon, but he was exposed to more and more in kindergarten. Soon he would be an older kid, and I didn’t want him to not be able to have the same things as other kids his age.

“I promise, I will.”

“I know you will. I’m going to make dinner; you watch your show.”



## DRAKE

I'd been back in Millers Glen less than a week and had already run into Kira. I was still reeling with the odds of that when I saw her again. At first, I thought I had to be seeing things. I was driving through town, regaining my bearings, and being reminded of how excessive holiday decorations were around Millers Glen, when I saw her halfway up a ladder reaching above her head for a garland that was twisted around the top few feet of a streetlamp. The streetlamps in Millers Glen were the old-fashioned looking ones, fluted tapered columns with acorn shaped glass domes that resembled old fashioned gas lamps. She was going to over balance and tip into the road.

I quickly pulled my car over, and dashed out, leaving the engine running, and the car door open.

I had my hands on Kira's hips and my shoulder braced against the rickety ladder in a matter of seconds.

She let out a startled scream, twisted, and then she grabbed onto my shoulders.

Suddenly my arms were full of Kira, the ladder was on its side in the road, and she was laughing.

"Drake! Where did you come from? You caught me. What the hell happened?"

"Whoa, I meant to keep you from falling." But her in my arms was much better. I slowly set her on the ground. "Are you okay?"

She looked from me up to the work she was doing, to the ladder in the street. “I guess I am.”

“Good, good. I’ll be right back, give me a minute.” I dashed back to the car and opened the back door.

My daughter’s large blue eyes were rimmed with the threat of tears. Her lower lip quivered as she stared at me. Lona started to make nervous whimpers. “Hey, beautiful. Daddy is right here. I didn’t go anywhere. Come on, let’s get out of here. I want you to meet a friend of mine.”

I unfastened her buckles and lifted her from her car seat. Reaching into the front, I pressed the ignition to turn the car off before closing the door.

I held Lona on my hip and approached Kira where I left her.

“You have a kid?” Kira blurted out. She quickly covered her mouth, and then let out a nervous giggle. “Sorry, sorry. Of course, why wouldn’t you? Drake has a kid.”

I shrugged off her nervous words.

She stepped into the street and retrieved the downed ladder.

“This is my daughter, Lona.”

“Lona, that’s a pretty name,” Kira said. “My name is Kira. How old are you, Lona?”

Lona held her hand out and we could see her finger wiggling under her pink mitten.

Kira reached out and wrapped her fingers over Lona’s. “That feels like a three. Are you three?”

Lona nodded.

“She’s adorable. Very pretty girl.”

“She looks more after her mother than me, but...” I stopped talking. Kira didn’t need to know about Violet right at this moment. And I didn’t want to talk about the accident in front of Lona. She could learn the details in time, when she was older.

“I decided, since it’s just the two of us, that growing up in a small town would be good for her.”

“You got tired of the city? I can’t imagine how it would be with a little kid,” Kira said.

“It’s a lot quieter up here than I remember. I forgot how much Millers Glen decorates for the holidays,” I mentioned.

“I thought they decorate a lot in the city,” Kira reminded me.

“Of course, they do. Time Square, the tourist spots, but in our neighborhood, there were only a few shop windows, and of course, the parade. But on a percentage basis comparing population and per capita ratio, it’s nothing like Millers Glen.”

“I’m not sure what you just said, but your point is clear,” she said. She leaned the ladder back against the light pole. “You think you can spot me again, with her on your hip?”

“Sure can.” I set Lona on the ground. “You stay right here, okay?”

She nodded and wrapped her arms around my leg. I could deal with that.

“How did you get roped into doing this?” I asked as I held the ladder.

Kira climbed up, not so far that I had to stare at her ass. But I did. It was lovely and round, like a juicy apple just waiting for me to take a bite out of it. I chuckled to myself. She always had appealed to me on a physical level, that hadn’t changed.

“Roped in? I’ve been working on the town decorations ever since I worked at the flower shop. You remember Cassandra’s flower shop, don’t you?”

“Of course, I remember Cassandra. Last I heard she was in New Hampshire?”

“Vermont. But I’ve been on the decorating committee ever since,” she said.

“Nice that work lets you take the time you need to help this place maintain traditions.”

Kira let out a sharp bark of a laugh. She reached up and secured the garland to the pole. “Okay, I’m coming down.”

I braced the ladder, and enjoyed the view until I needed to step aside so Kira could dismount.

“Lets me take time? You sir, are a riot.” Kira smirked. She looked down at Lona. “Is your daddy always this funny?”

Lona just stared at Kira with wide eyes.

Kira picked up the ladder. “That was my last garland. I’ve got to get this turned in.”

“What are you doing after that?” I asked.

Kira shrugged. “My job lets me take time to do this because I am currently between jobs. After this, I head home and find five jobs to apply for and send in my resume.”

“I didn’t realize. Only five?”

“Yeah, five a day is my goal. Some days it’s as many as three. But I shoot for five a day in my field. It’s not nearly as easy as it sounds. Especially since I’m also trying to stay in the area.”

She turned and started to walk away.

I grabbed Lona’s hand, and we ran to catch up. “Hey, you couldn’t be interested in a temporary situation until school starts again?”

Kira put down the ladder and squinted at me. “School? I’m not in grad school. I don’t need to worry about classes. Why?”

“I figured once school starts the local school district would realize they need you and hire you. Or you’d start tutoring or something. You’re too smart for someone not to snatch you up.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” She smiled, and it lit a fire in my gut I hadn’t felt in years. Not even Violet set my libido on edge the way Kira did.

“So, what’s this situation you had in mind?”

“I need a nanny until I can find someone permanent. And it sounds like you need something to hold you over until you

find something more permanent.”

She tilted her head to the side and stared off into the distance, considering my offer. “I think you need to move your car before you get a ticket.”

I twisted around and saw the cop car she had been staring at.

“Cra— shi— errr,” I started to cuss and then remembered Lona. My gaze darted back and forth between Lona, the car, the approaching cop car, and Kira. I didn’t have time to get Lona buckled in.

“Go, I’ve got Lona. We’re going to head over to where I need to take this. The other side of City Hall.”

I dashed to my car and jumped in. Thanks to technology for the keyless entry and push button start. I had the car running and pulled away from the curb.

Kira picked Lona up, and the two of them waved as I drove past.

City Hall was half a block away and across the street. By the time I parked and found them again, Kira had already turned in her ladder.

“We haven’t had lunch yet, and hanging garlands must have given you an appetite. Would you be interested in lunch at Yuri’s? We can discuss the specifics of your job.”

“You’re serious?” she asked. She held my daughter as if it were the most natural thing for her to be doing, and she had to ask if I was serious about having her as a nanny.

“I’m very serious. I’ve left my whole operation back in New York, but my office is here in my house. I’m still unpacking from the move. I haven’t had a chance to get any staff into place. Juggling everything and Lona has been more of a challenge than I realized it would be.”

“Kids aren’t passive, quiet, sit in the corner toys waiting for you to play with them. They need constant attention,” Kira pointed out.

“I’m discovering that. I can’t even take a video call without being interrupted.”

We started walking toward the diner. As with most things in this town, it wasn't very far from where we started. The smell of warm grease and fried food greeted us as we stepped inside.

Kira grabbed a booster seat from inside the door and slid into a booth. I placed Lona in the booth before I took the opposite seat. Kira held the plastic booster out to me, and I managed to wrangle our coats, and get Lona settled.

“She’s three Drake. At her age she doesn’t self-regulate, she can barely entertain herself. You can’t set her up with her own little workspace and some coloring books and expect her to keep herself occupied while you are on video. She’s going to want to know who you are talking to. And if it looks like you are watching TV or playing a video game, she is going to want to watch and play too.”

“Have you been spying on us?” I teased.

Kira gave me an exasperated look and sighed.

“That textbook obvious?” I asked.

She nodded. “You would be surprised at how many people expect their toddlers to be mini adults. At her age she’s still working out the specifics on potty training, she’s not ready to work in an office. Or let you work in one.”

I considered her for a moment. “I told you, you’re smart. Are you at least going to consider the offer? Or are you in this for a free piece of pie?”

Her brows went up. “Pie? And if I accept your offer, what else is in it for me?”

“A salary, a spending allowance, benefits.”

“Benefits?” She asked as if she had never even thought that as a nanny she would get benefits.

“Well, technically you would be an employee of my company, and as such taxes would come out of your checks, you would be paid with direct deposit, and you would qualify for the standard company benefits.”

“Are you going to make me go to New York to fill out paperwork for the HR department?”



I shook my head. “No, I can handle everything from my home office.”

“And how soon would you want me to start?”

“When are you available?”

“How does nine tomorrow morning sound?” She smiled.



# KIRA

I'd be lying if I said I jumped out of bed eager to get started at my new job. I was thrilled to be working for Drake, and I was looking forward to watching his daughter. Because absolutely none of that was true.

I should accept that it was a good thing to have a job. And yes, being a nanny was in my field, but it's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to work with and help many children, not just one or two at a time. I wanted to help design programs and implement best practices in educational milestones.

But I could keep a three-year-old occupied while her father worked. And there was nothing preventing me from my continued job search. I only hoped that Drake was going to continue his search for a nanny.

I didn't fully grasp his meaning regarding not having staff until I pulled up the driveway to his house. It was this house. And now I also understood why it had been sitting empty except for the guard who sat at the little gate house at the end of the drive.

"Oh boy," I muttered as I pulled to a stop next to the gate.

Ted Miller, no relation to the Millers of the town name, leaned out of his little window. "Kira, what are you doing on this side of town?"

He meant what was some low-rent girlie like me, with a fatherless kid, cruising along the richest street in three counties.

“I’m working for Drake Schriver, just like you are,” I said. “I had no idea this was his place.”

“Oh yeah, he and that little girl of his moved back a few weeks ago. I thought they were going to sell the place there for a while. But I guess he decided to keep it after all. You aren’t the new maid, are you?”

I shook my head. “With a place this big he definitely is going to need one. No, I’m the new nanny.”

“I didn’t picture you as the nanny type.” Ted said.

I didn’t want Ted picturing me doing anything. He dated Brittney for a while and was a regular at the Dugout. Fortunately, he was never interested in me. The feeling was definitely mutual.

“Well, I like to be the employed type. I’ll see you around.” I pressed the window up button and started moving before he could say anything else.

My morning was not off to a fantastic start.

Drake answered when I rang the doorbell. He looked at me, and down at Landon who was holding onto my leg and standing slightly behind me. After clearing his expression, Drake invited us inside.

“Lona’s playroom is off the kitchen.”

We followed Drake through the lavishly decorated house. It looked like an older woman had decorated it. I assumed Drake’s mother. We passed through the kitchen, a home chef’s dream with endless counter space, one of those huge refrigerators, and a commercial sized stove with six burners.

“Do you like to cook?” I asked.

“No, but I can grill a hamburger, and I know how to use a microwave. Did you know you can buy salad kits all ready to go, complete with salad dressing?” Drake said.

“I do. You can also chop up your own lettuce for a lot less money.”

“My skill levels aren’t there yet. I’m looking for a housekeeper who can cook. You don’t know anyone who can cook and clean, do you? You wouldn’t want to expand your nanny duties to cooking, would you?” he asked.

“You have no idea if I can cook, and you’re willing to pay me more to also cook for you?”

“Pay you more?”

“Yeah, adding in a second job is going to require a second job’s pay,” I pointed out.

I was clenching my stomach muscles too hard. I had to talk, otherwise it would have been my jaw I was clenching. Drake was beautiful this morning. He was dressed casually for work in jeans that hugged his ass and emphasized his strong thighs. His button down was open at the neck, and the cuffs rolled at the wrists. And he smelled so nice.

It was taking everything I had to appear professional around him. Maybe that’s why I was overcompensating and being snarky, borderline rude. I had been suffering emotional turmoil from the second I agreed to work for him, to take care of his other child, the one he knew about.

I don’t know what possessed me to bring Landon with me this morning. I could have left him with Aunt Angie, as I had for every day, I had to work in the past five years. But I dragged my poor sleepy baby along with me today to meet his sister. Half-sister. I didn’t tell him that’s what we were doing, just as I wasn’t ready to tell Drake that Landon was his.

“You’re a good cook,” Drake continued.

“I made dinner for you once. I don’t recall that we ever got a chance to eat it,” I said.

Drake rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah.” He looked down at Landon and then up to me. “Yeah, I remember. That’s not going to make things weird here, is it?”

“I’m okay if you’re okay. I mean I did accept the job,” I pointed out.

Drake stopped walking. “Seriously though, Kira. Come up with a figure, if you are available and willing to take on cooking, I’ll pay you more. Lona needs healthy balanced foods, and I know that take out and fast food aren’t the best options for her.”

“Hey,” I started. “There’s a saying in the momma world when it comes to feeding babies, ‘Fed is best.’ It’s supposed to stop the shame and stigma between breast and bottle feedings, but it applies here too. You are feeding your daughter, that’s what matters most.”

“Thanks. But consider it. Finding a housekeeper who can also cook has been next to impossible. I think I have to realize my expectations and who is available are very different.”

He started walking again, leading us into a room filled with toys scattered all over the floor, and a large screen TV.

Landon gasped. It was a toy heaven as far as he was concerned. In the middle of everything sat Lona. She watched the TV with wide-eyed wonderment. She had the same thick curls that Landon had.

Did Drake see the similarity between the two of them?

“That’s Lona. Why don’t you go play while I talk more with her father, okay?”

Landon nodded and immediately went to her.

“Where’s your office?” I asked. Looking around the room, I noticed a baby gate blocking another entrance, and what I guessed was a bathroom or closet door.

“Today it’s on the couch.”

I hadn’t noticed the laptop and notepad until Drake pointed them out.

“I don’t leave her unattended so I can work. However horrible you have me made up in your head, I promise I am not that bad. I admit that I am struggling here. But I default to taking care of Lona over taking care of business,” he said with a chuckle. “Will they be okay if we step out of the room?”

I nodded. “Landon, baby, you’re the big kid in the room while I go see the rest of the house, okay.”

He nodded and sat a little closer to Lona. Landon took being the big kid in the room very seriously.

“They’ll be good for about fifteen minutes. Why don’t you give me a fast tour?”

Drake gestured and I followed him out of the room.

“Is that your son?” he asked.

“Yeah, Landon. He’ll be hanging out with us until he goes back to kindergarten after the break.”

“Landon, that’s a good name.”

I desperately wanted to know what Drake was thinking. But he didn’t say anything beyond showing me where bathrooms were, and then crossing to the opposite wing of the house to see his office.

“This place is huge,” I pointed out.

“It certainly feels that way after years in an apartment. And here is my office.”

We stepped into a blank room. It was freshly painted white with a red Oriental rug over hardwood flooring. There was a large heavy wood desk with a lamp and a chair. A generic looking beige filing cabinet was positioned behind the desk. And along one wall was a stack of moving boxes that still needed to be unpacked.

There were no pictures, no hints at the personality of the person who worked in these walls. It was fresh and new and boring. The only hint that he spent any time here was the small bright yellow and blue children’s folding table and chair set with crayons and coloring books on top.

“You don’t spend much time here, do you?”

“Not as much as I need to,” he answered. “With you...” he turned, and I guess he didn’t expect me to be right behind him, because suddenly we were face to face. My chest brushed against his as I gasped in surprise.

“With you,” his voice grew softer, “I’d be able to take my time to get the job done properly.”

I could feel his breath on my cheek. I closed my eyes, allowing myself a second to absorb the memory of what being so close to him had been like.

The next thing I know he was coughing to clear his throat and he took a giant step away from me. That loss reminded everything in my body what it had been like when he had walked away from me, the mistake.

I clenched my jaw and forced a smile. I was a professional, I was going to not mess this up. Besides, I really needed the money from the paycheck that came with this job.

“The bedrooms are down this way,” Drake said. His voice sounded groggy, and he moved quickly.

“What are your plans for the day?” he asked as we walked.

“There is a Christmas nativity petting zoo. I thought I would take the kids. Last year they had a camel ride. I don’t know if they have that this year, but there’s typically a donkey, a sheep or two. Cows and goats. It’s not fancy, but little kids love animals. And after that, I thought we would have lunch, and then it should be nap time.”

“Sounds like you have the entire day planned,” he said.

“Not really, just enough to get us started. Lona needs to get used to me. I need to learn her habits. But I thought being out of the house for a few hours would give you a nice chunk of time to focus. I didn’t realize just how big your home was.”

“I guess I thought you knew. It seems like everyone around here knows who lives where.”

“Maybe I didn’t really put two and two together.” I shrugged.

“Well, this is Lona’s room.” Drake opened the door to a very pink little girl’s fantasy bedroom. I guess he wasn’t joking when he said he deferred to taking care of her before doing anything else.

“And that is my room.” he nodded at a door across the hall.





## DRAKE

“**Y**ou know you don’t always have to take the kids away. My office is far enough from the playroom that I can’t hear you,” I said.

I stood with my arms crossed watching as Kira zipped Lona into her coat. Landon wrestled, getting his arms into his coat. I didn’t know how old he was, but it seemed that he should have been able to get his own coat on.

I tried not to think about Landon, he brought up a lot of questions in my mind. Questions like was Kira married? If she was, why hadn’t she mentioned it? Did she have Landon back when I had known her? And again, if that was the situation, why hadn’t she said anything?

But I didn’t think that was the situation. He seemed pretty young, even for being in kindergarten. She must have met his father in those first few semesters when she went to college. Finishing her degree while taking care of a baby must have been difficult. Clearly, she was competent, and organized. I could tell just from how she handled the kids; she knew what she was doing. It would be a shame to lose her as a nanny. Especially after I just found her.

“It’s not so much that I’m keeping them out of your way. It’s just that my house is so much closer to downtown. We waste so much time fighting in and out of car seats in my little car. Walking is good for all of us. I park at home; we can walk to the park and to the activities downtown. Lona has eaten really well at lunch the past few days, and then she and Landon take good long naps.”

She turned her attention to Landon, helping him with his coat. She kissed him on the nose once he was settled. She hadn't shown Lona that level of affection. I was going to have to speak to her about that. Not that I wanted Kira showering Lona with affection, but I wanted her to know that she shouldn't give her son so much emotional praise while she was obviously not doing the same for my daughter. Lona needed to know she was important to Kira, and not feel left out when Landon was around.

"But you take her away all day long," I pointed out.

Kira stood up and faced me with a sigh. "Drake, we are in the middle of the town's Winter Holiday Festival. You know that lasts for weeks, and it's not just Christmas. They are trying really hard to be inclusive and encompass as many different holidays as possible that fall this time of year. Personally, I want to show my support. So, I'm taking the kids to the activities and events as much as the weather, and these two, behave."

"I understand, but you haven't brought Lona back for the past few days until dinner time. And then I find myself scrambling to prepare something to feed her."

Kira pulled her coat on. "That sounds like you have a problem, Drake. You hired me to work specific hours as the nanny for your daughter so that you could focus on your business matters. Dinner was never a part of our agreement."

She wrestled with the zipper at the base of the puffer coat. She wore a blue one today. I still had images from the day I found her again. A red puffer jacket that framed her figure, burned into my memory. Yesterday her coat was tan.

"How many of these things do you own?" I asked as I stepped in close and took the zipper into my hands.

It didn't want to slide together properly. With a wiggle and a twist, I forced the simple mechanism into functional alignment. The zipper slid up over her breasts. I held onto it as I looked into her lovely face, and realized I was complaining for reasons I wasn't fully willing to admit to myself.

She seemed breathless when she finally answered me. “I don’t know. I have a closet full. I like my coat to coordinate with what I’m wearing. They are shapeless and style free, but they are warm and that doesn’t mean I should give up any sense of personal flair.”

I couldn’t take away my gaze from her lips and the way her mouth moved.

Kira wrapped her hands around mine and removed the zipper from my grasp. “What does it matter to you?”

“Nothing.” I shrugged the interaction off. I shouldn’t focus on how it felt like we both stopped breathing, or how the knuckle of my pinky finger lingered against the pressure of her breast.

“Have you given much thought to also being my cook?”

“I have, and I’m still thinking about it. I mean, I already have to cook for me, Landon, and Aunt Angie, so why not just make more and cook enough for you and Lona, too? But I don’t know exactly how that would work. I mean, no I’m not going to be some kind of nutritionist chef and prepare all of your meals. You’re a grown ass man, you should be able to take care of a bowl of cereal, or some scrambled eggs. I already feed Lona lunch, so it’s no hardship to expand that and make you a lunch as well. But keep in mind she eats ravioli from a can with her fingers. I can’t promise much more than cheese sandwiches and pickles.”

I shook my head. She was trying pretty hard to tell me no without saying no. “You can say no to me. That’s allowed Kira.”

“It’s not that, Drake. I’m trying to figure out the boundaries I need to set for myself as a nanny. I am willing to take some part-time cooking, but we have to be very clear what that means, what that job description looks like, and where do those work hours come from. I thought you would appreciate a complete proposal, and not a half thought out concept of what my duties would be.”

I thought she was very smart, but she was smarter than I gave her credit for.

“Fair enough,” I gave in. I picked Lona up and carried her as Kira guided Landon out the front and to her car.

It was a small sedan, with four doors. Nothing luxurious, and definitely not a make and model from the current decade. I helped to put Lona into the extra car seat I purchased specifically for her car. I gave her a quick kiss like the one Kira had given her son.

“We’ll be back after nap time,” Kira announced as she got behind the driver’s seat.

It started to snow as she drove down the driveway. She stopped and said something to Ted at the guard house. I was going to have to do something about his job. I was here now; I didn’t need someone looking after the house.

That idea needed to get filed for now. I wasn’t about to fire a guy before Christmas. And I’d rather keep him around but change the nature of his job. Maybe he was good at gardening or something. I shook my head and cleared it of the random thoughts that leaked in.

Kira turned onto the street, and her little car headed into town. I turned and headed to my office. I had to catch up with my office in the city, and I still needed to find a housekeeper.

I stopped in the kitchen on my way to pour a cup of coffee. Maybe I should get a coffee maker in my office? No. I realized that wasn’t the smartest solution. All that would do was save me a few steps. Something that wouldn’t impact my workload.

Once in my office and seated at the desk, I opened my laptop and jumped right into reading my emails. I spent a good solid hour reading and replying to messages before I looked up. The weather outside was sunny again. But it had been snowing. I could tell it was that deceptively bright, yet bitterly cold weather. Was Lona going to be warm enough? Would Kira get them out of the cold if it was too much?

I let out a heavy breath. Yes, Kira would make sure the kids would be warm enough. She wasn’t going to risk my child; she certainly wouldn’t risk her own.

I couldn't keep telling her how smart I thought she was, and then doubt her actions. I needed to let Kira do her job, and I needed to do mine. And part of my job required reviewing some files I could not find on the closed database.

I hit the call button on the video conference program.

"Drake, you know you should never video call without confirmation." Rob Kelly said as he answered my call.

I saw the side of his beard, and his ear. As he moved around, I got glimpses of what looked like a donut.

"How is this any different than just calling?" I asked.

"I'm barely presentable. I haven't combed my hair. Do I have a donut in my beard?" He faced me and brushed at his beard as if he was using the camera function as a mirror.

"Rob, stop messing around. But I take your point. I was looking for the pivot table data on the Smythe acquisition."

"Did you look in the Smythe folder?"

I heard his fingers flying over his keyboard, and his camera was now focused on the tops of his glasses and his forehead. I really hadn't needed this to be a video call.

"Of course, you did, that's why you are calling me. Okay... This file was downloaded, and it looks like Rachel Williams is the one working on those."

"Yeah, but why can't I still get to it?" I asked.

"Because Rachel is working on it. The file is locked when someone else has it open unless it's being shared via teams," Rob explained. "This one is not being shared."

I made a noise in the back of my throat. "Can she turn on the sharing?"

"Hold on," Rob said.

"Can I help you?" I heard a voice over his speaker phone.

"Rachel, I have Drake on video."

"Hi, Drake, how can I help out here?" Rachel asked.

"Are you working on the Smythe files?" I asked.

“Yes, I am. We received new data regarding the timetable...” she continued to describe the reasons behind why she had the file I needed.

I listened carefully. “It sounds like you have a few hours’ worth of work on that before you can hand it off.” I spoke.

“This will probably take me until lunch. Do you want me to give you a call once it’s available for you to work on?” she asked.

“Shoot me an email, would you?”

“Of course. Anything else?” She checked.

“That’s it for now. Thank you.”

Rob ended the call with Rachel.

“Do you need anything else from me?” Rob asked.

“Thanks for your help. I’m good.” I ended the call.

I didn’t have anything else that needed my attention for a few hours. I looked out the window, and it had started snowing again.





## KIRA

Lona squealed with giggles as she did her best to chase Landon up the hill. He would pause every now and again to make sure she was still behind him. At the top of the hill he stopped, and Lona jumped on him in a tiny tackle. They wrestled a bit before rolling back down the hill.

The snow was falling in fat fluffy chunks and sticking to the ground. Only it hadn't been falling for very long, so there wasn't much accumulation on the ground.

I stood at the halfway point on the hill. Close enough to both the top and the bottom, to get to the kids if they needed me. They didn't need me; they were having a great time together with no adult getting in the way of their fun.

And why would I? Happy giggling children made the world a better place. And so far these two kids have been delightful. I was still getting to know Lona. She wasn't the kind of child who was extroverted and easily talked to strangers. She was cautious at first, and once she knew she was safe she was outgoing. But with Landon, they were instant best friends.

Earlier at the petting zoo, Landon held Lona's hand and guided her to his favorite animal, a small calf.

"See, she has a soft nose," he said as he showed Lona how to pet the baby cow.

She giggled and danced in place when the cow licked her fingers.

"Oh no, Lanno," she cried when he got butted by a baby goat and knocked over.

Lanno, her name for Landon, thought it was the funniest thing ever to happen.

“I’m okay,” he said as he climbed back onto his feet. He turned and faced the baby goat as it lifted up on its hind legs and lowered its head. “Look, he just wants to play.”

Landon danced and jumped with the goat, and soon several other of the smaller kids, human and goats, were dancing about the enclosure.

I leaned against a fence post as I watched. I didn’t rush them. We didn’t have anywhere else to be, nothing else to do. If they wanted to spend the morning dancing with barnyard animals, I could handle that. I took pictures and sent the cutest ones to Drake. It was too bad he had to do his boring job. I was having a great time, and I was technically at work.

Landon dragged Lona over to me and they both held out their hands. “I need a quarter,” Landon demanded.

“You need a quarter?” I mimicked back.

“Can I have a quarter, please?” he repeated, using his polite words.

“Much better,” I praised him for correcting his choice of words. “Why do you need a quarter?”

I knew exactly why, but it was my role as mother to Landon, and nanny to Lona, to guide them into being polite members of society.

“We want to feed the animals.”

“What happened to the animal feed you had before?”

“Lona dropped hers,” Landon said. He dropped his too.

It was a bit of a shock to have an animal shove its nose into their hands, and not react with a little concern the animal might eat their fingers.

“Okay but let me do the machine.” All three of us crossed the pen to the coin operated kibble dispenser.

I put in a quarter and turned the handle, catching a handful of feed. I gave some to Lona and then Landon. The kids didn’t

have any time to move before sheep and goats surrounded them and demanded food from their hands.

The same goat that had butted Landon started to get even more aggressive with Lona. I scooped her up and out of the way before anything could happen.

“Hey,” I said to one of the attendants. “This little guy is getting really pushy.”

I pointed to the goat. And the attendant nodded as he crossed to the animal. “I’ll give him a break. Thanks for not freaking out.”

“Kids are going to do what kids are going to do,” I said. I felt particularly clever since the saying fit the situation since all the babies in that pen were called kids.

“Let’s go see the camel,” I suggested.

I put Lona down, and Landon quickly took her hand. The camel wasn’t nearly as fun. It wasn’t hungry, couldn’t be coaxed close by a handful of kibbles. It sat on the far side of its enclosure and blinked as snowflakes landed in its eyelashes.

By that point the snow that had been falling most of the morning was getting thicker. The kids had plenty of energy left. None of us were ready to go back home yet. I wanted to get them good and tired before we had lunch. The plan was to load them up with warm comfort food and put them to sleep for a good solid nap.

Snow blanketed the ground. As soon as we got to the park, a short walk of a few blocks, the kids ran straight for the hill. They ignored the swings, the slides, and the play structure. Instead, they frolicked and rolled around in the snow. If they were cold, they certainly didn’t act like it.

My phone buzzed. I shoved my hand into the pocket of my coat. It wasn’t there.

“Keep ringing,” I demanded as I fought with my coat and struggled to find which pocket my phone was in. It wasn’t in my jeans. Where did I put it? I had to unzip the coat to get at my hoodie. For once in my life, I felt like I had too many

pockets. The sweatshirt I wore under the hoodie had pockets, and that's where I eventually found my phone.

I looked at the caller ID, Drake had called. The phone started ringing again just as I was about to hit the call back button.

“Hi—”

“Why aren't you answering your phone?” Drake jumped in before I could even finish saying hi.

I laughed. “I have too many pockets. Sorry about that. Have you been getting the pictures?”

He grunted. “Where are you?”

“I'm out with the kids.”

“You aren't at the petting zoo,” he said.

“No, we aren't. How do you know that? Did you put a tracker in Lona's coat? Are you tracking my phone?” Anger swirled in my chest. If he couldn't trust me with his child, why had he bothered to hire me? “We're going to have to have a serious discussion about boundaries and trust, Drake.”

“I'm at the petting zoo now. Where are you?”

“Why are you at the petting zoo?” I asked. That made no sense at all. I thought he was tracking me from his office.

He got quiet for a moment.

“Drake?”

I heard him sigh. “You looked like you were having fun. I can't work on the analysis I had planned on this morning. I thought I would join you and the kids. But you aren't here.”

I laughed. It was actually sweet that he wanted to come play with us. Sweet in that knee melting way a single dad engaged with his children always appealed to me in the movies and rom coms. Not that Drake needed more knee weakening effects on me. His smile impacted me more than enough.

“We're at the park.”

“Don't leave. I'll be right there.” He ended the call.

My cheeks began hurting. I smiled so hard. I took a few quick pictures of the kid's barrel rolling down the hill. There was more snow on them than there was left covering the grass. I sent the photos to Drake and the kids kept playing.

I wasn't aware of his arrival until Lona was up and running. Landon was on his feet, and we were both running after her when I heard her yell, "Daddy!" And I saw Drake crossing the field toward us.

He crouched down with his arms out, and she tackled him.

Landon and I arrived a few steps later.

Lona was talking in rapid little kid fashion. Half of her words weren't quite right. I wasn't yet fully versed in Lona's speaking patterns, but Drake seemed to understand everything. And if he didn't, he faked it well.

"You smell like a baby goat," he laughed.

"Hi," I managed to say. I was more breathless than the short run would have done to me. I was entirely too aware that I was reacting to Drake and his daughter. I felt the grip in my chest of longing for missed opportunities of ever seeing Drake with Landon that way.

"You look like you're having fun," Drake said. I know he was talking to Lona, but he directed it to all of us.

"It's snowing, and Lona got to pet a baby cow," Landon jumped in with just how much fun he and Lona were having before I managed to say anything.

He turned to me. "Do we have to go in yet?"

I reached out and patted Landon on his knit hat. "What makes you think that?"

"Lona's daddy is here to pick her up. Does that mean we have to go too?" Landon asked.

"I'm not here to pick Lona up. I came to have fun with you. It's snowing," Drake said.

Landon's eyes went wide. I don't think he ever heard an adult say they were there to play. When the grownup shows up, it

typically means the play date is over.

Drake put Lona back down, and Landon claimed her hand before the two of them ran back to the hill.

“How long have they been doing this?” Drake gestured at the kids rolling down the hill.

I shrugged. “We’ve been here a while. And we’ll probably be here until they are too hungry to play anymore.”

“That’s the plan?”

I nodded. “Play until it’s time to eat. Then we’ll go home, clean up and have lunch. I’ll let them watch one episode on TV and then nap time.”

“Can I join you for lunch?”

I shrugged again. “It’s ravioli from a can, I warned you.”

“How about I buy lunch at Yuri’s?”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

By the time the kids were hungry, they were also too tired to walk. Even knowing he could have French fries for lunch, Landon just couldn’t manage. I hauled him up into my arms.

“I let you play too long, didn’t I?”

He gave me a nod and wrapped his arms around my neck. My walking pace slowed now that I had Landon in my arms. He was getting so big. I could still carry him, just not as easily as before.

“Here, we should swap.” Drake stopped me and held Lona out toward me.

“You sure?” I asked.

He nodded. Landon reached out for Drake as I took Lona. I tried to stop my heart from lurching to see my little boy in his father’s arms. Neither of them knew the significance of that moment. But it would be seared into my memory forever.



## DRAKE

Lona fell asleep in the booth during lunch, and Landon was flagging. I doubted he would stay awake on the walk back to Kira's home.

"Why don't I go get the car, and drive us home?" I asked.

Kira nodded. "They lasted longer than I expected," she said.

We had taken our time with lunch. I wasn't in a rush to get back to my office. Odds were high that Rachel hadn't finished her work. And I was on hold until that happened.

"Thanks. I don't think I have it in me to carry either of them very far. I guess I wore myself out too," she laughed softly.

"I'll be back in a minute. I left the car over by the petting zoo." Which was only across the square from the diner. I still had to walk about two blocks to where I was parked.

I got up and paid the bill on my way out. The cold air in my lungs woke me up a bit. I hadn't realized I was flagging and getting tired like the rest of them.

When I pulled up in front of the diner, Kira already had the kids outside and waiting for me.

I helped Landon into a booster seat I purchased at the same time I had purchased the extra car seat for Lona in Kira's car. Kira buckled the still sleeping Lona into her car seat before situating herself into the passenger seat.

I had a moment of warmth surge through my body. And in that moment, I felt like I had a family again, Sleepy kids in the back, a beautiful woman at my side. This could be my future.



This could have been my life if I hadn't been so concerned with my parents' reactions to Kira. Violet had been perfect, and my mother still found reasons to not like her.

The warmth in my chest was instantaneously replaced by cold regret and pain. Neither of the two most important women in my life were with me anymore. I shouldn't think ill of my mother, shouldn't be so quick to brush Violet's memory aside.

I shook my head. I had been quick enough to brush Kira aside. I was beginning to see that for the mistake it was.

"Hey, this isn't the way to my house," Kira pointed out as I drove.

"Sorry, no. Autopilot. This is the way to my home."

"Right, okay."

"Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. I'll just put the kids into Lona's bed together. They won't notice, or care."

"Where were they going to nap at your house?"

"I just put them in my bed. It's plenty big enough. Especially if I have to lie down for a bit to get them to settle."

"Wait, you nap with my daughter? I'm not paying you to sleep."

She glanced over at me and shook her head. "No, you pay me to make sure your daughter is being cared for. So that means if I need to help her settle down at nap time, I help her settle down at nap time."

We didn't speak for the rest of the short drive home. Landon was asleep when he arrived, so I carried him, with Kira carrying Lona behind me as I led the way to my bedroom. The bigger bed made sense.

"Um, this is your room," Kira said.

"Yeah, I guess I got 'bigger bed' stuck in my head, and just came in here." I carefully set Landon down and began taking his shoes and then his coat and hat off.

He rolled in toward the middle of the bed.

I watched as Kira did the same with Lona. Kira treated my daughter with the same careful consideration I would have taken, making sure to not wake her up. I crossed the hall and grabbed the baby monitor, returning to plug it into my room. I clipped the receiver to my pocket so I could hear when Lona woke up. Once the kids were settled in, and covered by my duvet, I followed Kira out.

“I guess I can understand the lure of wanting to climb in and snuggle with the two of them,” I admitted.

“After an active morning in the snow, yeah cuddling into a warm bed is appealing,” Kira said.

“How about curling up on an overstuffed chair with a hot mug of coffee?”

“That sounds delightful. But I think tea or cocoa would be better,” she replied.

“Come on.” I held my hand out to her and pulled her along as I made my way to the kitchen.

She went straight to the refrigerator and pulled out the carton of milk.

“Where do you keep the pans?” she asked.

I pointed to one of the low cupboards before finding if I had hot chocolate in the pantry.

I pulled out the container. It still had the plastic seal around the top.

“Oh, that’s the good stuff,” she purred as she took it from me.

“You want some of this, or are you going to drink coffee?”

“I think I’ll have hot chocolate too. It seems more fitting after a day in the snow.”

“It does. I think it warms me up faster than coffee ever does. That and it feels like a guilty pleasure. You know, a hot yummy drink, and chocolate.” She smiled as she talked about the chocolate. She poured the milk into a saucepan and stirred.

“Do you have any vanilla?”

I found some vanilla. The bottle looked old. I opened it and sniffed. It smelled fine. “I don’t know how old this is,” I admitted.

She did the same thing I did, opened the bottle and sniffed. “It should be good. This stuff lasts forever. How about sugar?”

“Doesn’t the chocolate mix have enough sugar in it?”

She laughed. “A little more sugar isn’t going to hurt. Besides, I like my hot chocolate thick and sweet.”

I let her make the drinks while I pulled mugs from the cupboard and found a box of cookies to snack on.

When she was done, I carried the steaming hot mugs over to the seating area. She carried a plate of cookies. We set everything on the low table between us. I pulled a folded quilt from a basket of blankets next to my chair and handed it to Kira.

“Thanks,” she said as she took it. She pulled her feet up and tucked them under her and wrapped the blanket around her before picking up her drink. She wrapped both hands around the mug and put her face right into the sweet steam and inhaled.

I grabbed a cookie as I picked up my drink. “Tell me about yourself Kira.”

She let out a sharp laugh. “You haven’t changed one bit. You used to take me to the diner, and I swear you started every conversation that way.”

“What do you mean?”

She took a sip of the hot chocolate before she began. “Every time we would go out for a coffee or for dinner, you started the conversation as if it were some kind of an advanced job interview.”

“Not a job interview, just a conversation opener,” I said.

“A very poignant opener.”

“What else am I supposed to say, Kira? I want to know about you, what you think, what your plans are. Sorry if my tactics

are a bit more straightforward than you are used to.”

She shook her head. “It’s better than all the hemming and hawing and games people play. I guess before I just wasn’t used to it. I had forgotten that about you. Okay, so what exactly is it you are dying to know.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say dying to know, but yeah, I’m curious.”

“Shoot.”

I nodded. “Tell me about your son. How old is he?”

Kira lifted her brows, and shaking her head took a long slow sip of her drink.

“Landon is wonderful. He’s bright and caring. Very empathetic. He’s five. He started kindergarten back in September, and he’s learning to read. You should see him trying to read to Lona, it’s the sweetest thing ever.”

“Five, huh? What about his father?”

Kira’s eyes went wide before her expression changed and she looked into the mug. She got a thoughtful expression on her face.

“I don’t know how old his father is.” A soft smile spread across her face and her eyes went out of focus.

At least she seemed to have fond memories of the man.

“That’s not—”

“I know, I couldn’t resist. He’s not around. Hasn’t been for a long time.”

“He doesn’t see his son?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine not seeing my own child. Maybe my situation was different since it was just Lona and me. But Lona was my heart outside of my body. An expression I didn’t understand until she was in my life.

She bit her lip and shook her head. “Landon’s father was out of the picture before I even knew I was pregnant.”

“And you didn’t try to find him?”

“Who says I didn’t try?”

I grunted, unsure how to respond to that.

“I was not able to let Landon’s father know of my condition, or later when Landon was born, I had no way of telling him he had a son.”

“So, you’re not married?”

She shook her head. “No, no husband. Not even a boyfriend.”

I was unexpectedly pleased to realize that there wasn’t a husband between my rekindling feelings and Kira.

“You don’t have any plans for tomorrow night, do you?” I asked.

“What’s tomorrow?”

“I thought you worked on the town planning committee. You should know what’s going on.”

“I’m on the decorating committee. I don’t plan anything. And you’re right, I should know more about what’s going on, but I don’t. What’s tomorrow night?”

“There’s a barn dance.”

“Oh, that. That’s tomorrow?”

I nodded. “You wouldn’t be interested in going with me, would you?”

“That actually sounds like a lot of fun. We’ll need a babysitter; the kids would not have a good time. Even though there will be kids there, Landon and Lona are too young to have a good time.”

I considered her for a moment. A babysitter? My default choice would have been Kira, but she was going to be with me.

“I could ask Ted if his wife is available.”

Kira shook her head. “Ted and Lee Ann will be there, too. We could ask my Aunt Angie. I don’t think she has anything else going on.”

“That would be ideal.”



## KIRA

“**W**hat time is your friend picking you up,” Aunt Angie asked.

I stood in front of the long mirror that hung on the closet door at the end of the hall.

“He’s my boss, and he said he would be here at six-thirty.”

“Six-thirty. That’s right in the middle of dinner. Is he taking you out to dinner? Do I have to feed Lona?”

I hadn’t worked out any of the details with Drake once I agreed to go to this dance with him. I was too busy trying not to be nervous. This was a date.

He hadn’t said it was a business outing, or any other kind of excuse like he used to give me when he would invite me out for a coffee or to buy me dinner. So that made this a date. There were probably a million policies I was overstepping, or completely ignoring by going to the dance with him. I really hoped he didn’t show up and announce this was his unofficial Christmas party, because I wanted it to be a date.

Drake’s office wasn’t anywhere near here. The only other person who would see us who might say something was Ted, and he didn’t care.

“I don’t like these boots with this skirt,” I announced before heading back into my room.

I pulled off the boots, and then I slipped the skirt down. It wasn’t the boots I didn’t like; it was the clothes.

Aunt Angie was still leaning against the wall when I came back out in a different skirt. “Honey, that looks exactly the same as the last one.”

“It’s different.” I smoothed the skirt over my hips. This one looked better. I swished watching it sway around my knees.

“A black skirt is a black skirt. Kira, I don’t know what you are fussing about. You have seen this man every day for the past week. You know half of anybody going is just going to be there in their regular clothes. You don’t have to dress up.”

“And the other half of everyone will be dressed up, and I will be too,” I said.

“You’re going to feel foolish when he shows up in jeans, and you went to all this trouble to look pretty.”

I rolled my eyes before I glared at her. “I thought you were supposed to say I looked pretty no matter what I decided to wear?”

Aunt Angie took a step closer and wrapped her arm around my head, pulling me down to her level. She kissed the top of my head. “You are pretty no matter what you wear. And if he can’t see that, I don’t understand why you are dressing up.”

“I’m dressing up because I like to feel pretty sometimes. It’s barely any different when I dress up to meet Sunny and Brittney at the Dugout. And I don’t know if you need to feed Lona or not. It’s best to just assume you do. I don’t expect us to be out late, but you can put Landon and Lona down in my bed if they get sleepy.”

“You honestly expect the two of them to get sleepy?” Aunt Angie laughed.

She let go of her hug and left me to finish getting dressed. I was skipping down the stairs when the doorbell rang.

I opened it to see Drake with Lona in his arms. As soon as she saw me she squirmed until he put her down. She ran inside, and apparently straight to Landon based on the sounds of their giggles.



“I’ve been thrown over for another man,” Drake complained with a laugh.

“Let’s not put that level of relationship on the kids. Come on in. How many other kids has she been exposed to? She has her first best friend, that’s enough of a relationship, don’t you think?” I said as I backed up so Drake could step in.

“I bet you say babies don’t flirt.” Drake said as he followed me into the TV room

“They don’t. They are charming and they like the attention. It doesn’t make them flirty. That’s adults forgetting how to interact with other humans without sexualizing everything.”

Lona was on the floor next to Landon; she still had her puffy coat and hat on. Her mittens hung from the leashes that kept them tethered to her coat so they wouldn’t get lost.

“Lona let’s get your coat off,” I said as I leaned over to help her.

“Did you feed her?” Aunt Angie asked.

“Drake, this is my Aunt Angie. I don’t think you two have officially met.”

Drake crossed the room, said a few words of greeting and shook Aunt Angie’s hand. It was weird to hear him call her just Angie without the aunt title.

“I tried. But when she learned she was coming over to play with Landon tonight, she refused to eat without him.”

Aunt Angie huffed and chuckled. “Typical kids. Landon was the same. Good thing I’ve made them macaroni and cheese. Where are the two of you going for dinner?”

Drake looked at me and grinned. I expected him to say the diner, again.

“I thought we would have dinner at Le Bistro. I made reservations,” Drake said.

Le Bistro, that was fancy. I gave Aunt Angie a look with my eyes wide and my mouth in an O. It was a good thing I had

dressed up. That's when I noticed that Drake was wearing dress slacks and not jeans. He had dressed for a date too.

My stomach did a little flip.

"Lona, come give me a hug. I'm going out with Kira." Drake kneeled down next to Lona.

She gave him a tight hug around the neck. I crossed the floor and kissed Landon on the head.

"You be good for Aunt Angie, okay."

"And I'll take good care of Lona, too," he announced.

"You do that."

"I can read to her," he said.

"I think she would like that a lot." I stood and turned to Aunt Angie. "I don't think they'll give you much trouble. We won't be late."

Drake stood and we made our way to the front door. "I didn't mention it earlier, but you look very nice this evening," Drake said as he helped me on with my coat.

"You look very nice too," I said. "So, Le Bistro?"

"Have you been? They weren't here when I lived here before."

"Have you honestly not been back to Millers Glen since you left? I mean the city isn't that far away. It's not like you moved across the country, it's in the same state."

"New York City is a completely different world from up here."

He opened the car door for me, and I slid into the passenger seat. "That's true. New York City is a different world, but still... yeah. Le Bistro is pretty good. I don't know how authentic it is regarding French cuisine."

When the car stopped in front of the restaurant, we both stared at the front door. The lights were out, and it was clear no one was around.

"Are you sure you had reservations?"

Drake parked the car and got out, running to the door before coming back.

“They are closed. There’s a plumbing issue and they’re shut down until everything gets fixed. I’m stuck for dinner ideas. All I know is the fast food out by the freeway, and Yuri’s.”

“You forgot the café, and the doughnut shop. We do have a few more restaurants. How about the Dugout? They have burgers,” I said.

“The sports bar?”

We ended up with burgers and fries, and beer instead of rich cream laden dishes I couldn’t pronounce. I liked the fancy place, but there was a level of comfort in familiar places.

Drake’s conversation blissfully did not start with ‘tell me about yourself.’

“What should I expect at this barn dance? Will there really be dancing?” he asked.

“You sound nervous. Did you actually ask me out to a dance, but you don’t dance?”

He shrugged. “Dancing always seems like something women expect to do on a date. You know, dinner, dancing...”

He trailed off before he said anything that might implicate romance.

“You could have asked,” I said.

“Every time I ask you a question you act like I’m interrogating you,” he said with a sheepish grin.

He was so incredibly handsome, and he was definitely flirting with me.

“Fine, be that way,” I teased. “Drake, can you dance? Do you have any intention of dancing with me?”

“Oh absolutely, but I make no promises as to my skills on the dance floor.”

By the time we got to the high school gym, the location of the town’s holiday barn dance, I was more than ready to test Drake’s dance skills.

“This isn’t a barn,” Drake pointed out as we handed our coats in at the coat check and received our claim tickets.

“No, but it is decorated like one. There’s even hay on the floor. Come on, you promised me dancing.” I grabbed Drake’s hand and dragged him out to the middle of the floor.

Drake swung me around and into his arms against his chest. It was a pretty smooth move. I leaned into him as he held my hand and placed his other hand on my hip. I let Drake sway and guide me through several dance moves.

I was wrapped up in the feel of being in his arms. He surrounded me completely, taking up all of my senses. I could feel his warmth, and the smell of his aftershave filled my nose. He hummed slightly along with the music.

I knew he had a completely different life when he had left me. But now he was back. Was I in a position to lay claim to him?

He guided me through the steps of what I realized were a waltz. I stiffened a little. He was my boss, I shouldn’t simply just melt into him the way I was, the way I wanted to give myself over to these feelings completely. The music transitioned to something more up-tempo.

Drake released his hold on me slightly, and I stepped out of his arms. It hurt in my gut to do so. But there was too much I didn’t know about him. Every time we had sat down to talk, he had asked me point blank to tell him, but I hadn’t been quite as forthcoming in my questions. The last time I gave into him, I had gotten hurt.

“Kira?”

I turned at the sound of my name, and the next thing I knew I was up in the air, and then crushed in a bear hug.

“Oh my God, Kirk! What are you doing in town?” I asked as he swung me around.



## DRAKE

I wasn't seeing straight when the man grabbed Kira and spun her in his arms. She giggled and laughed. And then she was standing next to him, her arm wrapped around his hips. He loomed over her and practically covered her with his arm draped over her shoulder.

"Damn, seeing you in this gym brings back memories."

"Drake, this is Kirk," Kira introduced us.

Kirk stuck out his hand and I reluctantly shook it. He had his other hand on Kira. My Kira. My vision was clouded with an unfamiliar sense of possession.

"We were in the middle of a dance when you interrupted," I growled.

"Drake, we were not." She placed her free hand on Kirk's chest and leaned into him. "Kirk's an old friend."

He squeezed her. "Old friend my ass. We were hot back in the day. You are looking good; are you single again? We could be hot again."

"Stop it, Kirk," she giggled.

"She's not single," I growled.

I reached forward and pulled her out of his embrace. "Her days of being hot with you are over."

Kira squirmed out of my grip. "Drake, stop it. Kirk and I dated in high school. He's joking."

"I could be flirting with you, Kira," Kirk said.

I did not like his arrogant smirk, or the way his eyes roamed over her figure.

“Don’t flirt with her.”

“Drake, stop. You’re overreacting.”

“I’ll let the two of you work through your lover’s spat. Come find me if you want to party.” Kirk left, but my attention was on Kira.

“Am I overreacting? You’re my date tonight. That doesn’t mean you should flirt with whoever winks at you. My God, I never realized you were so easy.”

She didn’t say anything. Her chin quivered and she pursed her lips together. “I think tonight needs to be over now. Please take me home, so you can pick up your daughter.”

I stared at her. She ran hot and then glacially cold. “Oh, so I don’t want you to dance with other men, and you’re going to throw a toddler fit about it?”

“No one said anything about dancing. I was simply saying hi to an old friend. Not someone I’m interested in, but someone I once knew. You’re the one acting like a toddler. You’re too much. And I’m not saying that in a good way.” With a flip of her hair, she walked away. Her coat folded over her arm.

I held my coat claim ticket out numbly and watched her for a few moments as she stormed away from me. Her hair swayed and her hips bounced. And I was a fool if I let her get away.

It wasn’t until my coat was put in my still outstretched hand that I realized Kira was leaving me. I rushed after her. I caught her just outside the dance in a hall lined with red lockers. I grabbed her upper arm to stop her.

She spun around, and her eyes flashed with anger, and glittered with tears.

“Let go!” She tried to wrench her arm away.

Instead of holding more firmly, I eased my grip and stepped in close. I wanted to hold her, not bruise her.

Her breath came rapidly. She wouldn't look me in the eye. But I couldn't help but notice once my arm was around her, and her body was pressed close to mine, she didn't try to squirm away from me. Her gaze was on my mouth.

I hooked a finger under her chin and tilted her face up until she met my gaze. Her pink tongue darted out from between her luscious lips to lick before retreating.

"You," she started breathlessly. "Are my employer. You can't tell me who I can and can't mingle with. And I won't allow you to treat me like I am some kind of cheap piece of meat."

I kept looking into her eyes, running my gaze over her face. I couldn't stop touching her, smoothing strands of hair away, brushing the tears of anger with my thumb.

"You aren't meat, Kira. You have always been confusing and special."

She placed her hand against my chest and gently pushed me away. She wasn't struggling, wasn't fighting me, just requesting space. I stepped back.

"Confusing? Are you sure you know what that word means?" A touch of a smile curved the corner of her lips.

"I admit that I've never known how to behave around you."

"Drake..." She shook her head.

"Hear me out. I asked you inane questions that are best left for job interviews, I hounded you about going to college, and when I saw that man take you away from me, I acted irrationally."

"Irrationally? You propositioned me inappropriately for an employer, on top of that behaved in a really shitty way to treat me as a woman. Irrational? No Drake, you're being a dick."

Her words felt like a slap. I took another step away from her. I ran my hand over my cheek as if she had struck.

"That wasn't my intention."

She crossed her arms, which did amazing things to her breasts. My body was focusing on the wrong things. I shouldn't have



been more concerned with how her breasts were pushed up and heaving with her breaths. I should have been paying attention to the fact I was pissing her off and that's why she was breathing heavily and crying.

I needed to be present in the moment, not lost in what I wanted.

"I haven't been on a date in a very long time. I pretty much forgot how to do all of this," I admitted.

She lifted her brows and tilted her head to the side.

I held my hand out to her, but she didn't take it.

"I wanted to date you when I first met you. At the time I was more concerned with appearances and the opinions of others."

"Oh, you think telling me that you were attracted to me against your better judgement is going to make this situation any better. Well, it's not working Drake. I wanted to date you back then too, but..."

She shook her head and fluttered her hand.

"When I met Violet... There were things about her that were ideal. I am all too aware now, that it wouldn't have mattered who I brought home, my mother was never going to approve. Never. She was even prissy when she found out Violet was having a girl, and not giving me a son."

I had to stop talking as the memories tried to overwhelm me. My focus went hazy. I didn't look at anything really before I continued.

"I was never happier than when we learned the baby was a girl. I would have been just as happy for a boy, don't get me wrong I was happy about the baby. It didn't matter, boy or girl."

I let out a long slow breath.

"The night Lona was born, there was a storm. Nothing unusual, not even particularly bad, but for some reason there was just a series of events that culminated in the worst possible of all outcomes." I cleared my throat before continuing. "The change in barometric pressure pushed Violet

into labor. Apparently, it did that with a lot of women that night. She called the office and told me to meet her at the hospital. I was working late. I always worked late. My uncle volunteered to drive me to the hospital, and Violet was home with my parents, they were taking her to the hospital. There was a freak accident near the hospital. A semi lost control and plowed through an intersection and into oncoming traffic. The car my uncle and I were in was clipped on the driver's side and spun. The car Violet and my parents were in was hit directly on. I wasn't even conscious when Lona was born. I was told that Violet hadn't survived before they did the emergency C-section."

Kira made a sobbing gasp.

"Seven people died in that accident. Lona and I were the only survivors from my family.

When I focused back on her face, there were more tears running down her cheeks and her fingers covered her mouth.

"Kira, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't think I could stand up to my family before I lost them. And I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner. I have been struggling with raising an infant on my own, and never once did I allow myself the luxury of feeling hopeless or lost. And I have been both ever since I learned I lost my parents and my wife, and that I had a little girl all in the same few hours after regaining consciousness from my injuries. When I saw you crossing that street, for the first time in years I felt like I had made the right decision. Maybe I really wasn't lost any more."

She dropped her coat and closed the distance between us. My arms instinctively went around her as she wrapped herself around me.

"I think, subconsciously, I may have come back here because I hoped you were still here."

Her hand was soft and warm, so warm as it caressed the side of my face. I closed my eyes and turned into her touch.

She lifted up on her toes and pressed her sweet lips against mine. The kiss was soft. It was a safe harbor in a storm. And

then it joined the storm. Her lips parted slightly, and my tongue plunged into her mouth, seeking, tasting, claiming. I gripped her to me as if I could press into her for respite and solace.

She was everything I needed. Warmth, compassion, life.

“Do you still want to get out of here?” I managed to ask. I didn’t want to stop kissing her or touching her.

“Please, take me home Drake. Your home,” she said in a raspy breathless voice.



## KIRA

I had Drake in my arms. His pain was so strong it radiated from him. He had endured far too much; it was a miracle he was functional.

His mouth against mine was greedy and needy. He was seeking solace, and I was doing my best to give every bit of comfort I could. I don't know how we managed to make it back to his place. I either held his hand, or rested my hand against his leg the entire time we were in the car. Fortunately, Millers Glen is small, so the car ride wasn't long from the high school to his home.

"You don't have to do—"

"Shut up, Drake, just drive." I didn't want either of us to stop and think about what we were doing.

Once at his house we didn't speak as he led me through the quiet halls. It was as if we were under some kind of spell that wasn't broken until he closed the door to his bedroom.

He leaned against the door and stared at me.

I felt incredibly sexy, and desired. I had no doubts that he wanted me. It was probably the first time I ever felt quite like that. Even the first time I had been with him, I hadn't felt this sensual, ever. It was a heady and powerful feeling.

I let my coat slip to the floor. Drake stayed where he was staring. His gaze bore into me, it gave me strength. I found courage I didn't know I had. As Drake watched me, I proceeded to strip for him. Not a tawdry strip club bump and grind tease. I slowly slipped my skirt down my legs, stepping

out of it and setting it aside. My blouse was next. I was left in a half-slip, my bra and my boots.

Drake's eyes blazed, and his nostrils flared. His fingers spread out before clenching into a fist. But he didn't move.

I leaned down to unzip my boots.

"Don't," he ordered.

I looked up. He was running his hands through his hair. He looked like he was pulling himself back from some edge.

"Okay," I said softly. Keep the boots, I could do that.

I let half of my slip slide down my legs before puddling at my feet, and reached behind me to unfasten my bra.

"Stop. Let me."

I froze. My hands were still behind my back.

Drake surged toward me. I reached out to him and welcomed him back into my arms.

His mouth grazed across my collar bones with a growl. He unclipped my bra and slipped the shoulder strap down one arm.

His mouth against my skin was the most amazing sensation. I thought I had committed every detail about being with Drake to memory, but this was new, this was different. Drake was somehow better than my memory, and my memories of him were the kind of memories that I could make last my entire life.

My ability to think was gone. I didn't want to think, I just wanted to feel. Drake's hands alternated between fierce grabbing handfuls and the softest feather touch as he trailed his fingertips across my skin.

My bra fell away, and he covered my breast with his hand, kneading me as his mouth continued to suck and kiss, and leave the softest scraping bites against my neck. He was taking everything he needed from me. I could no longer keep up. I clutched him as if he were a life raft in a flood, and I was going to get lost without him.

When he sucked my nipple into his mouth, I thought my knees would give way. The only thing keeping me on my feet was Drake supporting my body as he touched and held me.

“I want to touch you,” I moaned.

He growled and continued to consume my breasts with his hands and his mouth. He pinched and pulled one of my nipples until I didn't know my name.

I clawed at his shirt. I managed to pull the tails out from his trousers, but that didn't give me access to his skin.

He pulled away from me. My skin felt the chill of his absence.

Immediately I reached for the buttons of his dress shirt, working from the bottom up, and he undid them from the top down. He opened his shirt wide exposing a tight white tee underneath. He tossed the dress shirt to the side and pulled the tee over his head.

His chest was strong and broad. He was thick with muscle across his shoulders and pecs. It had been far too long since I had seen anything so beautiful. I trailed my fingers over his skin and through the smattering of chest hair. His chest lifted and dropped with every hard breath he took.

I backed up until my legs hit the bed. I pulled him down with me, letting our legs tangled together. If all we did was touch and kiss, I would take it. I wanted to take anything, every bit of attention he was willing to give to me.

He cupped the back of my head and kissed me as he pressed his chest against mine. I ran my knee over his leg.

“Those boots look fucking sexy, Kira, but they don't feel as soft as I know your skin is.”

He lifted away from me and sat up. Leaning over, he lifted one leg, cradling my calf. He unzipped the boot and slid it from foot. Tossing the boot aside, he chuckled when he saw my knee socks.

The expression on his face was beautiful. His smile displayed one half dimple, and his eyes crinkled up with mirth. He massaged, digging his thumb into the thick ball of my foot. He

worked his fingers into my arch, around my heel, and up the Achilles tendon. Having my foot rubbed felt amazing.

He rolled the sock down and then off my foot.

I expected him to put my foot down and take my other boot off, but instead he continued to massage my foot before sucking my toes into his mouth. I closed my eyes as the sensation undid my very being. Warmth combined with a softness I wasn't familiar with. He sucked and I felt a jolt of electricity from his mouth to my core. His tongue swirled around and between. He plunged his tongue between my toes in the same motion and rhythm I could only imagine his hips would move in.

I moaned as if he were touching other parts of my body. My torso writhed and my hips rocked. If he could make me feel this way simply by touching my feet, I was eager for the rest of his touch. My breath was ragged, and I was weak as he set my foot down and lifted my other one to remove that boot.

His fingers dug and rubbed the sole of that foot, leaving me completely limp.

Left in only my panties, and desperate for more, Drake left me to stand. Our gazes locked together as he kicked off his shoes and finished taking his clothes off. He reached forward and gripped the thin fabric at my hip. He slid my underwear down my thighs, slowly. I didn't know if he was teasing me or himself.

Holding my arms open, I beckoned Drake back to me.

He climbed onto the bed, and slowly, tantalizingly, kissed his way back up my body. He cupped my pussy, and I wanted to cry out at the contact. I wanted so much more. Bucking my hips, I increased the pressure of his touch against my core.

He continued to kiss my skin until he sucked a nipple into his mouth. As he sucked and twirled his tongue over my nipple, he began sliding his fingers between my folds. I was slick with desire, and his fingers skated over my clit before dipping back, teasing my entrance.



I dug my fingernails into the thick muscles of his shoulders. “Oh, God. Yes, please touch me.”

I grabbed a handful of his hair, and fisted the sheet into my other hand as Drake pulled all thought from me. There was nothing left to me but nerve endings and needy pulses.

When he slid two fingers into me, I cried out and rocked against his hand. I needed his touch. Pressing my heels into the mattress, I lifted and tried to get him to increase the pressure of his touch.

Drake lifted his head and smirked at me when I pulled hard on his hair. I needed him, but I couldn't manage to speak. He lifted and pressed his lips to mine.

Trying to pull him completely over me, he followed as if he could read my mind. He positioned his hips between my legs.

I lifted my hips, seeking his cock. I wanted him. I didn't care if he was using me. He could use me, he could cast me aside, as long as he gave himself to me.

“I need you now, Drake.”

“Kira.” My name was a growl on his lips as he surged into me.

He filled me completely. He was in me, around me. We were a completed unit of desire. He held against me hard and strong while time stood still for the two of us. At that moment, he was mine and I was his.

And then he began moving. He slid and thrust, and I was lost to everything except my clawing need to go harder, and faster. I needed to be higher. Drake needed to pound me into nothing. His touch sent a cascade of firing nerves and pulsing needles through my body.

Sparks flashed behind my eyelids as I tried to remember how to breathe, how to grind back and give as much pleasure as I took.

A shudder claimed my body. My ability to dance along with Drake's body was lost. I had no sense of timing. I twitched and quivered as the pinnacle of sensation washed over me. I

crashed around him as he clutched me to his chest and pounded into me.

I couldn't find a purchase for my grip. I didn't know what to do with my hands. My fists pounded against the bed as I cried and gasped. My body was not my own. I had no control.

Drake thrust hard and held his hips to mine as his body shuddered his own orgasm. It was as if we were suspended in space before we both sank in exhaustion into the mattress.

“Kira, thank you.”

I held him and stroked his hair as he curled against my side and rested his face against my breast.

I felt his body relax as he drifted to sleep. There was no sleep for me. I couldn't help but think about how this changed everything. And that I needed to tell him about his son.



## DRAKE

“**D**rake, Drake.” Kira’s soft voice cut through my sleep and into my dreams.

I groaned as I rolled over. Sleep was warm and everything comfortable.

“Drake, get up.”

I ran my hand over my face and pushed to a sitting position. “Yeah, I fell asleep,” I announced as if she wasn’t well aware of it.

“We need to go.”

I reached over and dragged Kira across my lap. I nuzzled into her neck. She smelled good and felt even better in my arms.

“This is my house; we don’t have to leave.”

She giggled and lifted my face away from her skin, forcing me to look at her.

“I told Aunt Angie we wouldn’t be out very late. She expects me to come home. She’s not going to go to bed until I’m there.”

“Is she going to ground you for staying out all night?” I chuckled.

She narrowed her eyes ever so slightly at my sarcasm. “No, but she will be disappointed in me. And she might not be available to babysit again when we need her.”

I folded Kira back against my chest and kissed her soundly. I wanted her to be well aware that I would rather stay in bed.

“Fine.” I let her go and tossed the blankets so I could get out of bed.

I enjoyed watching her wiggle as she picked up her clothes and scurried off to my attached bath.

“Did we have fun at the dance?” she asked through the closed door.

I picked up my clothes and shoved my legs first into my shorts, and then my trousers. “What do you mean, did we have fun? It was a rather intense—”

“Aunt Angie is going to ask us how the dance was. I thought we might want to get our stories straight. Because if you grunt and tell her you didn’t have a good time, and I say I had fun, she’s going to want to know why you’re so grumpy.”

“I’m not grumpy.”

She opened the bathroom door. Damn she was amazing. She stood there in her skirt and bra. Her hair was a wild mess clouded around her shoulders.

It was all I could do to focus on what she was saying as she reached up and pulled her hair into a messy bun. My brain and my cock could only see her breasts.

“You are a total grump, Drake. But tell my aunt you enjoyed yourself. She doesn’t need to know you were seconds away from putting your fist into Kirk’s face.”

“Was it that obvious?” I asked.

She laughed and pulled her shirt on. “It was so obvious. That’s why Kirk was egging you on. He was being a jerk, and you were responding exactly how he wanted.”

I let out a heavy breath and sat on the edge of the bed. “What can I say, you brought out my possessiveness. I didn’t like him in my territory.”

She barked out one of her sharp laughs. “I’m not a territory, Drake. But I do like the idea of you being jealous over me.”

“I wasn’t jealous,” I said through clenched teeth.

Kira sashayed over to me and slid her hands over my shoulders. “Whatever you want to call it, I like it. I like being associated with you. Now hurry up.”

Once in the car, she looked out the window, only casting nervous glances and little grins my way. I pulled in behind her car and followed her up the concrete steps. I hooked my hand through her elbow and pulled her against my chest. I claimed her lips. She responded and molded her body against mine as our lips slid together.

“Don’t kiss me in front of my aunt,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll try to remember. But you should know, I am inclined to kiss you a lot.”

We were quiet as we entered the dark house.

A single light illuminated over Aunt Angie sitting in a rocker and reading a book.

“You’re home,” Angie announced. “The kids have been asleep for hours. Did you have a good time? How was dinner?”

Kira nodded. “The dance was really nice. I ran into Kirk. Do you remember him?”

“Did he cause any problems for you?” Angie asked me.

I shook my head. “He tried to, but Kira set him straight.”

“And how was Le Bistro?”

I wasn’t sure, but I thought I heard a note of catching us in a lie in her voice.

“We ended up getting burgers. The restaurant was closed,” Kira said.

“The note on the door said plumbing issues,” I added.

Angie pursed her lips and opened her eyes wide. She was not impressed with me for some reason.

“I should go get Lona, so you can get to bed. Is she upstairs?”

Kira placed a hand against my chest. I wanted to lace my fingers with her and pull all of her to me. Instead, I didn’t

move, as she spoke to her aunt. “Leave her here for the night. Are they in my bed?” Kira asked.

Angie nodded.

“I’ll sleep in Landon’s bed tonight. Come over for breakfast. Lona is perfectly safe.”

Angie made a noise in her throat.

“Let them sleep. Getting her up and into the car, and then into her bed at home will disrupt her rest. The kid’s will be so excited they had a sleepover.”

“Well, if that’s decided. I’m going to bed now. Don’t stay up too late talking.” Angie pushed herself out of her chair, leaning heavily on her thin wrists and the arms of the chair. She made a groaning uncomfortable noise as she straightened her back. “Goodnight.”

“Night, Aunt Angie. I’ll be up soon.”

We watched in silence as Angie climbed the stairs.

I reached out for Kira as soon as the old lady was out of sight. Kira stopped me with that same hand against my chest. This time I did lace my fingers between hers.

“Come back for breakfast,” she told me.

I kissed her fingertips before cupping the back of her head to pull her lips to mine again. Kissing Kira was one of the pure pleasures I had discovered as an adult.

She moaned into my mouth and then pushed me away.

“Stop, you need to go home.”

“Why?” I let my finger graze the side of her cheek.

“Drake, stop it. You can’t spend the night here. We can’t fool around with Aunt Angie in the house. Go home, go to sleep, and tomorrow morning will come that much faster. You and Lona can spend the day with us, or do you have to work?”

“I’m only leaving now so tomorrow will come sooner.” I kissed her one last time before stepping back.

“Bring some clean clothes for Lona with you in the morning.” Kira said as she followed me to the front door.

“And Drake?”

I stopped and turned to look at her. She wrapped her arms around my head and kissed me again.

“The dance sucked, but I had a really good time with you tonight.”

“Me too.” I jogged down the steps and forced myself not to look back until the car started and I had my seat belt on, making it too late to change my mind.

I didn’t want to go home only to crawl into bed alone. I took a drive out into the country that surrounded Millers Glen. The roads were dark with small remnants of dirty snow along the shoulders reflecting the car’s headlights. The moon darted in and out from the mostly cloud covered sky. There were no stars to reflect my thoughts against.

The dark void felt somehow appropriate. The road stretched out past the illumination of my lights, and I had to trust it was still there. It was an accurate metaphor for my life at the moment. I didn’t really know what I was doing, or where I was going. Everything ahead of me was an empty void until light fell on it, and the path behind me was lost to the darkness. I was somehow stuck in between.

Kira was the light and life and always in front of my eyes. But I didn’t know how we would be able to work, I just knew that was the direction.

And Violet, lovely Violet... she was gone, lost in the darkness. I saw her when I looked at Lona. But I couldn’t remember her exact features, and the more I thought about her, I could only conjure up Lona’s face. I knew Violet would always be with me.

As my mind drifted, part of me knew it was time to go home, and the dark empty road in front of me was my street. I knew exactly what was beyond the reach of my headlights. I had come back to Millers Glen; I had come back to Kira.



When I climbed into bed for the second time that night my bed felt empty and cold. I struggled to find comfort between pillows that weren't soft enough, and a duvet that was too hot.

My dreams never settled, and I constantly thought about where I was on a high wire between Kira and Violet. I loved Violet. I missed her, and I would mourn her for the rest of my life. But she was the one who was dead, not me. I wasn't ready to turn into a hermit because I lost my wife.

As soon as I grasped understanding my grief and my motivations for pursuing Kira, a wave of guilt would drag me back. How could I move on so soon? Violet was the mother of my daughter. Hadn't I loved her? Didn't I still love her? Had I not loved her enough?

And then I realized, for the first time, I had been a widower longer than I had been married.

As these thoughts swirled in my brain, I drifted in and out of a fitful sleep. Sometime pre-dawn I climbed out of bed and took a hot shower.

I got dressed in warm sweats, pulled on some socks, and staggered into the kitchen to make coffee. I sat on one of the overstuffed conversation area chairs. Sinking into the chair I let my eyes drift shut as I waited for the coffee to brew.

The sun was bright, and the smell of coffee filled the room when I woke up several hours later.

"Oh crap." I stretched and checked the time.

It was still early. I had plenty of time before Kira and the kids would expect me over for breakfast. After pouring a cup of coffee, I returned to my bedroom and found my phone pinging.

There was a text message from Kira.

'Wake up sleepy head and come over for breakfast!'

So much for having plenty of time.



# KIRA

**D**rake showed up a few minutes after I began hounding him via text. I honestly thought he would still be asleep. Considering he didn't have two rambunctious kids who were so excited to discover their best friend was right there with them when they woke up.

Their adoration for each other was so pure. They were the perfect siblings, built-in best friends. They had to know it in their hearts because they certainly had no idea. I was the only one who knew, and I wasn't ready to tell anyone yet.

The doorbell rang and Landon jumped to his feet. "I'll get it."

"You can let Lona's daddy in, but don't open the door if it's anyone else," I told him.

"Daddy?" Lona asked. She tried to wriggle out of the booster seat I had her in.

"Hold on, sweetie." I got her out of the chair in time for her to run straight into Drake's arms.

He swung her up and hugged her. "Did you have a good time spending the night with Landon and his Aunt Angie?"

All of his attention was on her little face. Lona reverted to her combination of big girl words and baby babble as she tried to tell him about her evening.

"That sounds like you had a very good time." He squeezed her and pressed a kiss to her cheek before she started to squirm, and he put her down.

“Why don’t you go put on cartoons while I finish up breakfast?” I suggested.

Landon grabbed her hand, and they ran into the other room. Drake looked over his shoulder before he slid an arm around my waist and drew me to him.

“I had a very good night last night, but I didn’t get a sleepover,” his voice was a low rumble. And then he kissed me.

I could have melted into him, but right now wasn’t the right time, and my kitchen wasn’t the right place. At least not yet. Maybe soon we could be one of those couples that kissed and danced while working together at cooking meals. I sighed, that would be nice.

“What?” he asked.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“That sigh, it sounded so... longing.”

I shrugged. “I had a good time too. And I think a sleepover would have been nice. Did you sleep okay? I don’t remember Landon’s mattress ever being so hard. I think I’m going to have to get him a new one. It was like sleeping on a cardboard box.”

“I’ve slept better myself. Where’s your aunt?”

“She’s still upstairs. Said it was too cold to get out of bed. I don’t blame her. It felt like an ice box inside here this morning. She’ll come down once I’ve got everything made. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat. What are you making?”

I gave Drake the rundown of the massive breakfast I was making from the sausage in the oven, to the slow oats on the back of the stove.

“It should keep us warm all morning. We’ve got a lot to do today. Did you decide if you can come with us?” I asked.

“I would love nothing more.”

I danced over to where he leaned on the counter and gave him a kiss. “Will you set the table? Plates and dishes are in the cabinet behind you.”

I crossed the room and called out to my son, “Landon, with you go let Aunt Angie know we’re setting the table for breakfast. Lona, come on in here, sweetie, let’s get you settled at the table.”

Everyone was settled at the table, and I was filling bowls with thick oatmeal when Aunt Angie joined us.

“The radio said we’ve got weather coming in,” she announced.

“It’s a good thing I’ve already planned to go shopping and lay in supplies. Did they say when?”

“Dinner time. They said it would mess up the evening commute and employers are already planning on closing at lunch, or not opening at all.”

“That sounds like they are expecting a big storm,” Drake said.

“I’ve made a list of a few extra things I want you to pick up since you’re going to be driving all that way, might as well stock up.” She handed a crumpled-up piece of notebook paper across the table to me.

It had a few household items, cleaning supplies, and the cookie making ingredients on there.

“Driving?” Drake asked.

“Yeah, we’re headed over to Sam’s Club, it’s about an hour away. It might be more if traffic is bad,” I explained.

“Then we’ll take my car. It’s got a higher safety rating than yours, and four-wheel drive for the snow.”

I laughed. I wanted to take his car, it was new and bigger than mine. But it was cute how he got all protective and insisted we use it because it was a safer vehicle.

“What are you planning on doing all day, while we are out shopping?” Drake asked Aunt Angie.

“I will be staying where it is warm. Add some firewood to that list, Kira. I want some dry wood for the weekend. Drake,

before you leave, will you bring in an arm load of wood and put it in the rack next to the fireplace.

“Isn’t your wood pile already dry?”

“It’s old and dry, and also a little damp from the snow and rain. It will dry out overnight once you bring it in, but I want some that’s good and dry until then.”

We finished breakfast, and Drake obliged Aunt Angie and brought in an arm full of wood.

“When was the last time you had that pile restocked? Most of that wood is old and falling apart. After this storm clears, I’m going to clear that woodshed so you can order a fresh load.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Aunt Angie said.

“Angie, you’ll be burning wood that’s more bugs and chips if I don’t.”

I know I swooned, but I think he won Aunt Angie over to his side when he volunteered to clean up our woodshed.

“I know a guy in Alaska,” Drake said after we all piled into the car and were driving out of town toward our shopping destination. “Who orders a full cord of green wood every year.”

“First of all, that Alaska, second of all green wood doesn’t burn, it smokes up the place at best,” I said.

“I wasn’t finished,” Drake said firmly. He looked over at me and winked. “His woodshed fits two full cords. He burns the dry wood, and lets the green wood spend all year drying. Rotating through. Apparently, it’s cheaper to buy the wood while it’s green.”

“In Alaska,” I added. “That’s a lot of wood. Our little shed only holds like a quarter of that.”

It wasn’t even a proper shed. It was a small extension off the side of the house next to the breezy way, with a roof and two walls that provided a safe, relatively weather protected location to store firewood. The wood we had was old because last year’s winter was so mild, we barely used the fireplace at all.

“How much firewood do you have at your house?” I asked.

Drake shook his head. “None, there are no fireplaces in the house. My mother hated them, hated the way wood fires smelled. She didn’t even like going to people’s big outdoor picnic parties in the summer if there were grills running.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. I love a good grilled steak.”

Drake pulled into the parking lot of the first store we needed to visit. The lot was full, but we found a spot easily enough. I put the kids into a shopping cart and told Drake to grab a cart.

“You have one already.”

“Yeah, but it’s taken up by the kids, we need one for the stuff we’re buying.”

We began our quest for the items on Aunt Angie’s list.

A few of the items I grabbed two of and put them in the cart Drake was driving.

“Why two?” he asked.

“One for my house, one for your house.”

He nodded, accepting my logic.

“Oh, we should get Christmas tree stands here, they’ll be cheaper than at the tree lot.” I turned the cart and headed back in the direction we just came from.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Drake asked.

“Not really,” I admitted.

“Hey look, they have packs of wood, should we get this here or will Sam’s club have wood?”

I shrugged. “Might as well get it here.”

We finished our shopping at the first place and then stopped at a Christmas tree lot in the parking lot at Sam’s Club before entering the warehouse store.

“What do you think of this tree?” Drake and the kids stood in front of a beautiful thick Blue Spruce.

“That’s gorgeous, but I think it’s too tall. I can only fit a seven-footer.”

“Yeah, but I have tall ceilings,” Drake said. “Should we get this one for the TV room?” He asked Lona. My opinion didn’t matter, after all it was his house. But I thought it was a perfect tree and wished it was smaller.

“We’ll wait here while you go find the guy.” I grabbed the kids’ hands and we danced around to make ourselves warm. It was definitely getting colder out.

“Is this our tree?” Landon asked.

“No, baby. This is Lona’s tree. We’re gonna have to find something smaller. Aunt Angie’s house isn’t big enough for a tree like this.”

“But will Santa come even if we don’t have a big tree?” He blinked his big eyes up at me.

I knelt down and pulled him into a hug. “You know Santa would come even if all we had was a little cardboard cut-out of a tree.”

He sniffled a little. I think he was scared that bigger and fancier meant more Santa. “I don’t want a cardboard tree.”

I held him close. “We’ll find something good. Look at how many great trees this lot has.”

A worker followed Drake as he strode back to us.

“Okay, is this the one for you?” the guy asked. “I’ll get it wrapped up.”

“We also need something about six or seven feet tall, and not so full.” I held my arms out indicating the wide base of the tree we stood in front of.

“Sure, we have some smaller trees over there.” He indicated the far corner of the lot.

I took the kids to go find a smaller, thinner tree. We ended up with a lovely little fir tree. It was smaller than what I had expected to get, but it was a perfect tear drop shape, and



Landon thought it was the kind of tree Santa would think was cute.

It took longer to get the trees wrapped up and strapped to the top of Drake's car than I had expected. We decided to treat the kids with fast food for lunch before making our way into the warehouse store for our last massive shopping trip.



## DRAKE

“Are they out?” I cast my glance up to the rear-view mirror to look at the kids. They looked slumped in their car seats.

Kira was able to twist around and look into the back seat. “Yeah, they’re out. Don’t hit any ice patches for a minute.” She unfastened her seatbelt and reached back over my shoulder. Her body blocked my view in the mirror.

“It’s a good thing you’ve kept car blankets in the car,” she said as she sat back in her seat properly and refastened her belt. “It’s even colder than when we got out of the store.”

“Angie was right to warn us about the weather. I think everyone in Sam’s were stocking up on supplies, expecting to be snowed in for days,” I said.

“Well, if we get snowed in, I’ll have time to bake cookies.”

“You bake?” I asked with a chuckle.

“You’re the one who wants to hire me to make you dinners and you don’t even know if I can cook.”

“I know you can cook. You made a hearty breakfast this morning, and you’ve made dinner before.”

She sighed and shook her head.

Maybe reminding her of the past wasn’t such a good idea. A time when I thought I had to give her up, before I met and lost Violet. Before either of us had children.

Suddenly a car zoomed past, swerved into the lane we were in, almost hitting the car in front of us. I slammed on the brakes, and quickly looked behind me to make sure the guy behind me didn't plow into my back end. I ended up swerving onto the shoulder before coming to a stop.

Kira's eyes were wide as she braced her hands against the ceiling and side handle over the passenger window. We both panted hard as our eyes locked, and then we both twisted to check on the kids.

Lona's face was scrunched up and she shifted around like she was having a bad dream, but she stayed asleep. Landon's eyes blinked open, he tried to sit up, but his eyes rolled back into his head, and he slumped back to sleep.

Kira sat back in her seat again with a big sigh. "Fuck. I'm glad he didn't try that earlier."

"Me too, you, okay?"

She nodded. "He was the driver version of that jerk trying to buy all the toilet paper."

I laughed. She was right. Some of the shoppers had been extreme at the store, including one guy who had loaded his cart with stacks of toilet paper. He started a fight with the employee who tried to stop him.

We moved away from the disturbance as fast as we could, so the kids didn't get upset. I did see the guy being escorted from the store a few minutes later, without any of the toilet paper he had been so desperate to hoard.

"You would think people would know better. Yes, a storm is coming, driving like an idiot doesn't help, it only makes it worse," Kira said.

I couldn't agree more. I grunted an agreement as I watched for a gap in the traffic to jump back in.

I eased the car back into traffic and we continued the drive home in relative silence. Kira kept twisting back to check on the kids, as if she couldn't trust her eyes that they were fine.

“Let’s stop at my place first. It’s on the way,” I said, trying to distract Kira from her worry.

“That’s a good idea. We can get the few dinner items we got for you into your fridge, and then sort the rest out when we get to my place, since most of the groceries are for baking.”

It was good to get her talking and planning.

“You could bake cookies at my place, you know,” I suggested.

I glanced over at her. She smiled.

“I could, and then you would have Christmas cookies to eat, and your house would smell like cinnamon and gingerbread.”

“That actually sounds nice.” I couldn’t remember a Christmas where the house smelled like fresh baking, my mother wasn’t a baker or a cook. The house did always smell good, we had scented candles, but that wasn’t the same.

I stopped at the guard house at the edge of the property.

“Ted, what are you still doing here? Go home,” I told him.

“I work my hours Mr. Schriver, you know that” he said. He was shivering and wrapped up in a blanket over his coat and hat. There was a small space heater inside with him.

“Ted, it’s too cold. Go home, and once this storm hits, stay home.”

“Are you firing me?”

I shook my head. “Not firing you, sending you home so you don’t freeze to death, causing a big legal problem for me. I don’t want you, or anyone, dying at work.”

“Thank you, Mr. Schriver.”

“I told you my name is Drake. We’re just dropping some shopping off, be gone before I come back this way. Go home and keep warm.”

I didn’t exactly speed up the drive at that point. I hadn’t realized how much snow had been falling and accumulated until my tires actually crunched over the driveway.

“Should we let them sleep?” Kira asked, looking into the backseat again.

“Let’s leave them buckled in. If they wake up, they wake up.”

“Okay, I’ll be fast and get your groceries put away. Will you need help with the tree?”

I shook my head. “I’ve got it.”

I wrestled the tree down off the car and dragged it up to the porch. Kira stepped out the door as I leaned the tree against the side of the house. The snow was coming down even thicker.

“All done. Are they still out?” she asked.

I managed to shrug and told her to check. “I’ll be right there. Let’s get you home before this gets any worse.”

The car door closed, and I hated that I had to take her home. I knew I was leaning on old memories, old feelings, and the renewed surge of lust and emotions from last night, but I was ready for her to move in. It would be easier for everyone. And most importantly, I wouldn’t have to leave her at her home and return to a big empty house.

The kids were starting to stir as I got in the car. I had left it running so they would have the heater and not wake up from the cold. I slowed at the end of the driveway. The guard house was closed up and dark, good Ted went home. I still had to figure out what to do about his position. I wasn’t sure if I wanted or needed a security guard. That was a decision for a later time.

Once at Kira’s home we unloaded everything. I helped her carry the sleepy kids inside and get them situated.

“Where’s Angie?” I asked, noticing how quiet everything was.

“She’s probably taking a nap.”

The snow continued, but the wind started, and that made everything worse. I was glad to be done moving the shopping inside.

“I’ll get the tree in a minute.” I spoke. I found a heater vent that was blowing warm air, and held my cold hands over it,

rubbing them together for improved circulation and warmth.

“You need better gloves,” Kira said.

“My gloves are just fine for putting my hands in pockets. But yeah, for any kind of work in this weather. I’m going to need something a lot thicker.”

“Don’t you have old winter clothes in storage back at the house?”

“Probably. I’m still trying to find where everything is in that house. I mean I lived in it, but that doesn’t mean I actually paid attention to running it, or where my parents stored stuff. I was kind of a spoiled man-child.”

Kira barked out her sharp-edged laugh, the one she used when I was being stupid.

“What?” I asked.

She simply shook her head. “Self-realization is a good thing.”

“You aren’t going to argue with me, or tell me I’m overreacting?”

“Why would I?” She began pulling pans out from cupboards. “Grab the milk, would you? You can look at it one of several ways, your parents did their best to support you, or they controlled you. Or anywhere on the scale between those two options. I wasn’t there, I wouldn’t know. To me it looked like they were supporting and taking care of you. But you have to remember I got ditched by my birth mother, so my perspective on family is skewed.”

I opened the fridge and pulled out the milk. Instead of handing it to her, I pulled her into my arms for a hug. I had to remember we had very different upbringings.

She let go and whispered, “Thanks,” before taking the milk and starting to make hot chocolate.

“Take off your coat. Go play with the kids while I get this ready,” she told me.

I obliged and sat down to watch cartoons with the kids until Kira stepped into the TV room. “I’ve got hot chocolate and

marshmallows, but you have to sit at the table.”

The kids scrambled it.

The doorbell rang.

We all looked at the door for a second, and then Landon ran toward it. “I’ve got it!”

Kira was right behind him.

“Mommy, it’s a stranger,” Landon yelled.

Kira opened the door. “Hello officer, can I help you?”

He glanced at a notebook; snow swirled in the door. I had a sudden sinking feeling that Angie wasn’t taking a nap. I picked up Landon and stepped away from the door to give Kira room.

“Why don’t you come inside. It’s cold and we’re letting the snow in.” Kira stepped back inviting the officer in.

“Are you Kira Chappell?”

She nodded.

“Emergency crews picked up Angie Chappell earlier,” he started.

Kira’s hands flew to her face.

“She’s fine, Miss. She slipped and fell outside. I’m just stopping by to let you know they have her up at County Hospital with a broken ankle. I guess she couldn’t get a hold of you so called to have someone come and let you know.”

“She... she’s, okay?” Kira stuttered.

“Just a broken ankle. You can call up to the hospital, they can fill you in.” He left with a “goodbye,” and a “keep warm.”

“We have to go!”

“Wait,” I tried to calm her. “Why don’t you call first?”

“Right, right.” Kira picked up her phone. She looked at it concerned. “I can’t get a signal, can you?”

I pulled my phone out, no signal.



They still had a house phone. I picked up the receiver. The line was dead.



## KIRA

**M**y heart was in my throat. I know the officer said Aunt Angie was fine, but in my head she wasn't. I couldn't get a hold of the hospital. If I couldn't talk to her, how did I know she would be okay?

The phone lines were down, the snowstorm was clearly on top of us with the wind and the thick snowfall.

"I need to get to the hospital. Can you watch the kids?" I asked Drake.

"You aren't driving out there in your car. It will never make it."

"Drake, it's my aunt, I have to." The back of my throat burned. I didn't want to cry in front of the kids, but I knew that my tears would start any second now.

"Hey." Drake pulled me into his arms. "She'll be all right. I'll drive you to the hospital. Everything will be fine."

I buried my face in his chest.

"Is Aunt Angie okay, Mommy?"

I left Drake's arms and knelt in front of Landon. I fussed with his sweater and tried to finger comb his hair into place. "She'll be fine. She just got hurt, and I got sad."

"Can we see her?"

I looked back up at Drake. I didn't know what to do, and I didn't want to take the kids out in this. The weather wasn't horrible at the moment, but it was going to get worse.

“Hospitals don’t let little kids in to visit. They don’t want you to get sick. But I need to take your mommy to see Aunt Angie.”

I gripped his wrist. He came up with an excuse the kids could accept that didn’t sound like I was telling Landon I didn’t want him there. I was scared, what if that police officer wasn’t telling me the full truth?

“How about I call Ted, his wife might be able to watch the kids. I think they only live a few blocks from you.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know his wife. She’s nice. Just tell him he’s guarding the kids, not the house. Maybe he won’t think you’re trying to fire him.”

Drake chuckled. “I’ve been trying to figure out what to do about his job since I moved back up here. Now that I’m in the house full time, it seems redundant to have a guard. But I’m not firing him before the new year. I’m not that heartless.”

“I never accused you of being heartless,” I managed to say.

“You might not have, but others have.” Drake clapped his hands together. “Let’s drink our hot chocolate, and then everyone can put their coats back on.”

I looked at him nervously. “Do we—”

“We have time to drink the hot chocolate. Besides, it will make you feel better. Warm you up.”

I chugged my drink and rushed everyone through theirs. The drinks had cooled down and were more warm than hot.

We all wrapped back up in our coats and climbed back in the car.

“Oh,” I stopped before helping Landon into his car seat. “The tree is still on the roof.”

Drake shrugged. “It’s just going to have to stay there. I don’t have time to take it down now.”

Moments later he pulled in front of Ted and Lee Ann’s house. He carried Lona, and I held Landon’s hand as we climbed the porch and rang the doorbell.

“Mr. Schriver, what are you doing here? Oh, never mind, come in,” Lee Ann said as soon as she opened the door. “I’ll go get Teddy, is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, we just need a favor. Kira’s aunt has broken her ankle, and we need to get up to the county hospital. I couldn’t think of anyone else, but could you watch the kids for a couple of hours while I drive Kira up there? Her car is in no shape to drive in this weather.”

Lee Ann looked from Drake to me, down to the kids. “Is Angie, okay?”

“A sheriff came to the house to tell me because the phones are down. It’s why we didn’t call first. He said she’s okay, but I have to go see for myself,” I said.

Lee Ann nodded. “You go check on Angie, and we’ll hang out here. I know Landon, who is this one?” She pointed at Lona.

Drake was introducing Lona when Ted came out to see what was happening.

“Is everything okay? Mr. Schriver, Drake, what are you doing here?”

“Kira’s Aunt Angie is hurt and up at County. We’re gonna watch the kids while he drives her up there.”

“Yeah, his car has good traction for snow driving. Sorry Kira, but your car is a traffic hazard.”

“Thanks Ted,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

I helped Landon off with his coat. “You be good for Lee Ann and Ted, okay. And make sure Lona behaves.”

He was so serious when he nodded and hugged me.

“Give me an extra hug for Aunt Angie,” I said as he squeezed his little arms around my neck.

Drake led me back outside, where I practically ran to the car. I was in my seat and buckled before he even had his door open. He got in and squeezed my knee.

“She’ll be fine. You’ll see when we get there. And the kids will be fine with Lee Ann and Ted.”

My stomach ached with anxiety. The worsening weather and the bad drivers on the way there didn't help me to calm down. I didn't breathe a sigh of relief until they took us to her in the Emergency Room.

She was in a bed, with her foot all bandaged up and propped up.

"What are you doing here?" Aunt Angie asked.

"I had to come see for myself if you were okay." I admitted. I gave her a long hug, and then an extra tight one. "That's from Landon."

"You could have called," Aunt Angie said.

"The phones are down. She's been a mess until I could get her here," Drake said. He stood back, and I pulled the only chair in her curtained off cubicle next to the bed.

"How soon before we can take you home?" I asked.

Aunt Angie shook her head. "Not today, that's for certain."

"What do you mean? They've set your leg. Why can't you come home?" I asked.

"The doctor said they're waiting to put me in a room. I managed to get myself an overnight stay in the hospital for observations."

"From a broken ankle?" Drake asked.

"From knocking myself out."

"What!"

She patted my hand. "Calm down child. I'm fine. I went outside to break the ice on the bird feeder, and opened my eyes to some fine young fireman asking me if I knew my name."

I gasped.

"Apparently, I slipped, and Candace's grandniece saw me laying down in the snow and told her. She called nine-one-one. Said I was moaning but wouldn't open my eyes."

"That sounds like a very good reason to hold you for observations," Drake said.

“That’s what I said. I’m fine. I’m just going to let the nurses poke me and not let me get any sleep and then you can come pick me up tomorrow and I’ll spend the entire day sleeping.”

The curtain slid open and a man in scrubs stood there. “Are you Angie Chappell?”

“I am.”

“I’m Jeremy with patient transport, I’m here to take you to your room.”

“See, I’ll be fine,” she said. “Why don’t you head home so you don’t get caught out in the worst of this storm, and I’m sure the phone lines will be back up tomorrow. I’ll call you when you can come and get me.”

I stood out of the way as Jeremy unlocked the wheels on the bed and handed Aunt Angie the tubes that were taped to her arm.

“All set?” he asked.

“All set.”

He wheeled her off.

Drake stepped in close, and I leaned into him.

“She’s fine. She probably has a concussion, and one heck of a headache, but she’s okay. And she’ll be okay staying here tonight. We should go home and get the kids.”

“Yeah,” I said in a small voice. My arms were still wrapped around my middle. I wasn’t certain if I was just hugging myself, or if my stomach still hurt. Everything felt cold and hollow. I knew she was fine. I knew she was safe, but I was having a hard time pulling myself out of that scary dark hole of uncertainty.

The drive back to Millers Glen didn’t help the growing apprehension in my gut. Visibility was down, and other drivers were acting crazy. Driving too fast and then slamming on their breaks or cutting us off because Drake wasn’t going as fast as they wanted him to.

I don't exactly know when I became aware of my crying, but suddenly I was.

Drake reached out and ran the back of his fingers down the side of my face. "Everything's going to be okay."

I knew it was. This was probably the adrenaline leaving my system in a rush. I wiped my face. "I know, I know. Sorry. I feel, I don't know, guilty maybe. I thought she was upstairs asleep. I hadn't even tried to look for her. What if she had been outside at that point?"

"Kira, you're going to freak yourself out over all the possibilities when we already have the outcome. It's not worth your time and energy."

"I know. I mean, technically I know, but the feelings of panic and anticipation and anxiety are all still there." I made clawing motions with my fingers in front of my stomach.

"You're going to eat yourself up worrying over what's said and done."

He tried to soothe me, but my anxiety wasn't having any of it.

"I could have lost her today. That would have been the worst, the absolute worst. She's the only family I've really ever had."

"Yes." That's all Drake said, just yes. He didn't elaborate.

Realization hit me; Drake had lost his entire family all at once. I closed my eyes. I was so stupid, so thoughtless.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't think. I know you've been there. I'm sorry, I shouldn't dump this on you."

"Yes, I've had losses. That's why you need to stop trying to imagine worst case scenarios when they haven't happened, okay. It's bad enough when they do, so don't try to make your situation worse than it already is."

"I'm sorry."

We were both quiet for a long few minute.

"We've all had losses," Drake's voice was rough. I must have struck a nerve.



I reached out for him, another apology on my lips.

“I lost my wife, and my parents. Lona lost her mother. Landon lost his father. Or is it his father who has lost Landon?”

The car stopped. We were at Lee Ann and Ted’s place. I didn’t jump out of the car to get Landon, I just stared at the side of Drake’s face. What was that supposed to mean? Where had it come from?

“Is Landon another one of my losses, or is there some other man out there who doesn’t know about having a son? Do you even know who?”



## DRAKE

I stopped the car and looked at Kira. She didn't say anything. Her eyes were wide with some combination that could have been fear, or anger. I let out a long breath through my nose and closed my eyes.

I had lashed out. Kira was hurting, and in her panic, she struck a very raw nerve deep inside.

"That was uncalled for," she snapped.

She was out of the car and up the walk to Ted's house before I could even think of a response.

I had wanted to shake her up. Wanted her to think about all the people who had lost loved ones. My words were to get her to think.

But she reacted as if I cut her.

"Kira," I called after her.

The door opened and Kira ignored me completely.

"Lee Ann! How were the kids? Aunt Angie is going to be fine. She slipped and broke her ankle."

Kira prattled on as if she hadn't been crying in the car, and that everything was perfectly fine. But it wasn't. She wouldn't look at me. Her little side glances and small smiles when we made eye contact were painfully absent.

"The kids were little angels," Lee Ann said. "They're watching television in the back with Teddy. I'll go get them."

I waited until Lee Ann stepped away. "Kira."

She spun around and held her hand out in a stop gesture.

“You wanted to hurt me; you did. Congratulations. I think we’re done here.” She was sharp and closed off. Her face a mask hiding any emotion she had.

She smiled when the kids came in and Landon ran to her, giving her a big hug.

I picked up Lona. It was hard to keep my attention on my daughter when Kira was being like this. I wanted Kira to talk to me. To listen to my explanation.

It was as if I wasn’t even there. She got Landon dressed for going out, helping him on with his coat, and pulling his cap down over his head.

“Thank you, Lee Ann. Landon say goodbye to Lona. It’s time for us to go home.”

“He can say goodbye later. I’m driving you home,” I told her.

“Say goodbye sweetie,” she said to Landon. “We’ll walk, thanks. I don’t want to take up any more of your precious time.”

She opened the door and pushed Landon out in front of her. The little boy seemed confused, but I didn’t think Lee Ann noticed anything.

“Kira!” I started after her, but realized Lona didn’t have a coat on.

I turned to set Lona down, but Lee Ann was right behind me, closing the door. “It’s too cold out there. Here, let me help you get Lona’s coat on. Kira just needs to walk off some steam. Aunt Angie took her in when no one else would. You can understand why she’s a little upset something happened to her.”

Lee Ann gave me an understanding smile.

I nodded. That wasn’t the only reason why Kira was upset, but it was the big reason. The reason anyone needed to know.

With Lona in her coat and bundled her into her car seat. I was tempted to drive to Kira’s house to make sure she got in safely.

I figured my interest in her wellbeing at the moment would not be welcome. Besides, I was now on my own for feeding Lona. And with the storm rolling in, that meant cooking at home, no drive-thru, no takeout. At least I had groceries.

I smiled and let out a small chuckle. Kira was taking care of us, even while she was angry with me. She would probably hate it, but it warmed my chest. It gave me an inkling of hope that I could salvage my mistake earlier.

The house was dark as we pulled up. I couldn't remember if I had left the inside lights on, but the outside lights should have come on by now. It was dark, and the lights were programmed to come on.

Once inside I flipped the light switch on and off several times.

"Crap," I let out a heavy breath. "No power!"

Lona whimpered.

"Let's find some candles." I knew there were some in a drawer in the kitchen. At one point in time Mother had candles scattered around the house, not to be used, but for the aesthetic. The furniture may be the same, but I didn't have the same accessories decorating the place.

Lona stayed by my side as I rifled through drawer after drawer until I found some stick candles. Fortunately, there was a lighter in the same drawer. Next, I had to find candle holders. I knew those would be in the butler pantry where the fine China and crystal was kept.

We tracked through the dark house, our way lit by a single candle.

"It's like being in a fairy tale, isn't it?" I spoke. "A dark castle, the wind blowing outside."

Lona said something that sounded more like booty and da beef, but I knew what she meant. "Yes, just like Beauty and the Beast."

We found candle holders and had a bit more light. But the house was growing colder and colder.

I found a thick sweater for Lona and pulled another sweatshirt on for myself.

The pre-packaged meals we had in the freezer needed either a functional stove, or a microwave to reheat. I had neither at the moment. I pulled out jam from the refrigerator and found peanut butter and bread.

I set the formal dining table with the good China. It made Lona giggle.

“I’m having a candlelight dinner with my best girl. We might as well do this the right way.”

Dinner wasn’t filling, and it was getting colder by the minute.

“Ready for more adventure?” I asked Lona.

“Let’s see if we can figure out why the heater isn’t working.”

We bundled up and I found a flashlight, which would be safe for Lona to hold, and we ventured down into the basement. It was darker, if that was possible, and colder. I had no idea what I was doing, but something had to be done. It was entirely too cold for Lona and I, even if we cuddled together under blankets.

The heater loomed before us, large and grey. It was a metal box with a completely blank readout panel.

“Is this thing electric?” I poked around, trying to find a gas line hook-up. There was none. Who the hell had put an electric heater in, and then didn’t install a backup generator?

We went back upstairs. I washed my hands and decided we needed to leave. We couldn’t stay there all night. I pulled out my phone on the off chance that the signal would be back. It wasn’t.

I contemplated finding a hotel, or seeing if Ted had a spare room. Lee Ann had been so accommodating earlier. But I knew where Lona would want to be. I wanted to be there too.

The drive didn’t take long. But it felt treacherous. The snow was piling high around anything that didn’t move. My car bumped over piles of snow that should have been a smooth roadway. We weren’t the only idiots out in this. I hoped every

one of us made it to our destinations safely. Outside in it, I realized how much worse this storm was than I had expected.

We arrived after what felt like an hour of driving, but I knew it had only been a few minutes. It still took at least twice as long as it normally took.

Landon threw open the door and yelled, “Lona’s here!”

I followed in and closed the door behind me. Lona was already gone into the house, but I stayed where I was.

Kira approached, her arms crossed, her expression dark.

“I’m sorry for earlier,” I said.

She didn’t even blink.

“The power is out at my place.”

“It’s out everywhere, Drake.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have heat, or a generator, or a fireplace. I couldn’t just let Lona freeze.”

That cut through her hardened exterior. Her shoulders relaxed.

“No, you couldn’t. It’s not very warm here, but we do have the fireplace, and the heater is limping along. Take your coat off and stay.”

I followed her into the TV room. Fire blazed in the fireplace, and there was a nest of pillows and blankets and books on the floor. Candles lined the side tables.

“Have you eaten?” she asked.

“We had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

“I’m melting cheese in a skillet on the fire. We’re going to dip chips in and pretend we’re camping. Later we’ll roast marshmallows.”

“Sounds like you have this all figured out.”

Kira shook her head. “I’m just doing the best with what I’ve got. Whenever the power went out when I was a kid, Aunt Angie would cook what she called camp-out style on the fireplace. I’m doing what I’m used to doing in these situations.

I think the power went out a lot more when I was a kid. Because this is the first time, I've done this with Landon."

Kira had created a nest of warmth in their TV room, she was providing warm food, and a memory that her son would cherish. He may not know that yet. Currently he was too focused on making sure that he and Lona were comfortable. They found a corner of the nest and he piled blankets over her before picking up a book to read. He stumbled over the words, but Lona was enraptured.

"Do you want some hot chocolate? It's just instant packs and warm milk." Kira offered.

"That sounds great, thank you. Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"You can keep the fire going." Everything she said to me was toneless. She interacted with me because she had to, not because she wanted to.

Quilted hot pads rested on the hearth. I used them to move the cast iron skillet of melted cheese out of the way before I added another log. It was a good thing I had brought in firewood. Had that only been this morning? Today had been a very long, and emotional day. But it was over. Everyone I cared for was with me and safe as they could be given the situation.





## KIRA

I woke up in Drake's arms. For a moment I forgot everything we had and hadn't said the night before. I pretended to still be asleep so I could enjoy the comfort and warmth. My heart and my body wanted this, but my head was getting more and more pissed off at me. How could I find comfort in his arms when he had been so mean?

Or maybe he hadn't been? I didn't know anymore. It felt like he had tried to hurt me on purpose.

Reluctantly, I eased away from him and sat up. Landon and Lona were snuggled up between us.

I tucked more blankets in around them so they wouldn't miss the heat from my body.

It was cold, super cold. But I could tell the heater was still working. Otherwise, it would have been absolutely freezing.

I poked the fire to life and put on two more logs. I pulled another blanket around me before looking out the window. Drifts of snow were piled higher than the front stairs. There would be no shoveling the driveway out, because I could barely tell where the drive was. The cars weren't much more than taller piles of snow. And it was still snowing.

"Oh boy," I mumbled. I checked the house phone line, just to be certain, but there was no ring tone. I shuffled into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee before heading upstairs to get myself cleaned up for the day. I had coffee grounds in the filter and had poured a pot of water into the tank before I remembered there wasn't any power.

With a groan, I climbed the stairs and got cleaned up. Upstairs was cold. I thought the heat was supposed to rise. I rushed through my routine and made my way back downstairs. It was noticeably warmer in the TV room with the fireplace and all of the blankets.

While everyone slept, I rummaged around in the kitchen looking for what would be easy to cook in the fireplace. I went with the easiest. I pulled out a pot and stirred in packets of instant oats with some water. I sprinkled in brown sugar and added some applesauce and cinnamon. It would smell good once I got it over the flames and it began to cook and bubble and fill the TV room with the smell of cinnamon and apples. The warm oatmeal would give us all a thick hearty breakfast, something we were going to need on a day like today.

“Eh,” I grunted in frustration. With only half a loaf of bread left, sandwiches were not an option. I felt foolish for not putting bread on the shopping list. Instead, I had plenty of ingredients to bake bread, but without electricity I didn’t have an oven to cook it in. I didn’t think I was skilled enough to bake bread in the fireplace.

Not wanting to bang around while everyone was sleeping, I got things set up as best I could in the kitchen, ready to carry in and cook over the fire when the kids woke up.

Everything was cool and quiet. Too quiet. It was a standard winter morning cold inside. I didn’t want to think about how cold it was outside.

Lona woke up first. I helped her to get up and go potty. We cheered that she made it through the night without any accidents. I helped her into some fresh undies we kept at my house. She shivered and whined that it was cold.

“I know, it is. But you’ll feel nice and toasty soon enough, I promise.”

Drake and Landon were awake when we went back downstairs.

“Are we still without any power?” Drake asked. His voice had that deep sleep filled rumble that I found very distracting. He

ran his hand through his hair. He was simply yummy. But I was mad at him and would be until he admitted what he said had been deliberately mean when I was particularly vulnerable and needed support.

“Powers out, but the heater is still going, it’s gas. We also have hot water. The phone lines are still down. I haven’t checked my cell yet. I wanted to save my battery,” I gave him a basic report of the morning status.

“I’ve got breakfast started and can cook it over the fire while you and Landon get cleaned up for the day.”

“Why? We aren’t going anywhere, and no one is particularly dirty,” Drake said.

“I know, but he at least needs clean undies.”

“Mommy,” Landon complained.

“Don’t mommy me. Go upstairs and get cleaned up for the day. You don’t have to change clothes, but you need clean undies. Now scoot.”

I looked at Drake, and hoped my intentions of cleanliness were clear in my gaze. Just because we were going to be stuck inside for who-knew how long, it didn’t mean we couldn’t maintain a level of civility.

“I’ll make sure he’s cleaned up,” Drake said.

I mouthed, ‘Thank you.’

Lona was fascinated with cooking over the fire. She kept saying we were living in a fairy-tale. I didn’t think either of us qualified for the Snow Queen or even Elsa.

“Better a fairy-tale than a nightmare.”

Breakfast was thick and warm. We didn’t have much to do other than sit around and read and try to stay warm. The kids lasted about an hour, which was longer than I had expected, before they started acting crazy and demanding to go out and play in all the snow.

“We can’t play in that, it’s deeper than you are tall,” Drake pointed out. “Maybe tomorrow. This storm isn’t done with us,

yet.”

“I have an idea,” I said. “Our tree is still on top of your car.”

“It’s frozen,” Drake said.

I nodded. “Yeah, but we can have the kids decorate it, and that will eat up at least a few hours of time. They’re going nuts, and sooner than later, they’ll drive us nuts. I’d rather save us all the grief and do something.”

He flared his nostrils at me. I could tell he was still as annoyed with me as I was with him. But we were adults, and we knew how to behave in a situation that wasn’t ideal. And right now, that meant keeping our children entertained.

“Okay. Let’s do it. Why don’t you and the kids clear a space in here or the living room and put up the tree stand. I’ll go get the tree off the car.”

“Take a broom to sweep the snow off the top of the car, that might help.”

He grunted and got himself ready. “I’m going to need a lot more than a broom,” he said when he opened the door to go out.

“How deep is it?” Landon was by his side and ready to run outside without boots and a coat on.

“Oh no you don’t.” Drake caught the boy as he tried to dart past.

“Do you have a shovel? I need to make a path to the car.”

“Uh huh, it’s in the garage. With the other gardening tools,” I said.

Drake let out a humorless chuckle. “Is your garage attached?”

“No, but the breezeway is covered. Remember? You were out there yesterday.”

After getting the shovel from the garage, Drake began digging out a path from the front door to his car. I pulled out the arts and crafts supply and set the kids up on the dining room table. I had stacks of construction paper, glue, glitter, and safety scissors. I carefully showed them how to loop and glue strips

of paper until they giggled with delight as the paper chain grew longer and longer.

Drake came back inside. He brought a draft of cold air in with him. He stomped his feet and rubbed his hands together, holding them in front of the fire. "I need a knife or something to cut the rope. It's frozen. There's no way I can get the knots untied."

"There should be a utility knife in the junk drawer. I'll go see if I can find it." I got up from where I was organizing the art supplies on the dining room table.

"Don't you have normal ornaments? Do you make new tree decorations every year?" he asked.

I could feel the cold that clung to him as he stood entirely too close to me.

"We do, but everything is in the basement. It's dark and creepy down there even when the power is on, and I can see everything; there is no way I'm going down there with only a flashlight. Besides, this will keep the kids entertained until lunch, and maybe even after nap time."

I continued to rummage through the drawer. I found the knife and turned. Drake was right there, so close. My pulse rate jumped, and I think I stopped breathing.

His gloves were like icicles as he wrapped his fingers over mine to take the utility knife. "Thank you."

The morning passed with all the activity keeping us busy. Drake got the tree off the car, and we set it up in the family room. He then joined us to make ornaments. While I cut out paper snowflakes, he showed off by folding origami birds. There was something about the handmade decorations that made me think our tree was going to be the most beautiful it had ever been.

The phone rang. We all stopped and stared at it until it rang a second time. I launched from my seat and picked it up. "Hello?"

"There you are; you aren't answering your cell phone. Is everything all right Kira?"

It was Aunt Angie. I started to laugh with relief.

“The phone lines are working,” I announced to everyone in the room, as if it wasn’t completely obvious.

“I haven’t been able to get a signal, so it’s off to save the battery. Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m perfectly fine. They are taking good care of me here. But...” She hesitated for a long time.

“But? But what? What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Nothing’s the matter other than this little snowstorm. They aren’t willing to let me go home,” she said.

“Oh good,” I sighed.

“You don’t want me?” Aunt Angie teased.

“We don’t have power. We are totally snowed in. Our street hasn’t been plowed yet. We couldn’t come get you even if they were releasing you. The phone line has been down since last night. I’m happy you were able to get through. It’s so good to hear your voice.” I cradled the handset to the side of my face and imagined I was hugging her.

She knew I kept secrets from her, but she let me have my dignity over Landon. And I knew she would hug me and tell me everything would work out if I came to her with the turmoil I was dealing with right now.

I wanted Drake, but he had also hurt me. How was I supposed to balance that? I let her soothing voice tell me she was fine while I locked eyes with Drake. Did he even understand the years of scrutiny and judgement I went through to keep his family name clear?





## DRAKE

**T**he television came on with a sudden blast of noise. Lights came on everywhere all at once. I flinched in reflex and jumped to action. I was across the room in a flash, running my fingers over the edges of the TV frame looking for the power.

I was still looking for the button when the TV flicked off. Kira stood behind me holding out the remote toward the TV.

She wiggled the device at me. “You could have used the remote.”

“I didn’t know where it was.”

She half shrugged and half nodded. “We try to always keep it on this table here.” She indicated as she placed it down. “I’m gonna go check on the kids.”

She crossed out of the room, and I heard her steps on the stairs. I went around the room snuffing out lit candles. When I was done in the TV room, I moved on into the living room, and did the same. I switched off the one lamp that had come on.

“They’re still asleep,” Kira said as she joined me back in the TV room. “I know it’s not, but it feels warmer with the power on.”

She crossed her arms and ran her hands over her upper arms.

“I know what you mean.”

“It will be nice to have a real dinner,” she said as she picked up a pot from the hearth.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I started. I gathered the rest of the cooking items from around the fireplace and followed her into the kitchen. “I think wood fire cooked oatmeal was novel, fun.”

“Fun for you, I was the one cooking. But the kids had fun.”

“You’ve done a good job with them. You know that. They have seen this as some big adventure. No one has been afraid or scared—”

“Speak for yourself,” she cut me off. She didn’t look at me, just stared out the kitchen window.

I waited for her to say something else, anything. Neither of us moved. I didn’t know what I was waiting for. I set the dishes down and left. I would have walked out of the house if I could.

I went to the front door and stepped outside, the farthest I could go in this small house to get away from her. Damn, it was cold.

Thin late afternoon light slanted blue shadows across the snow. It was perfectly white and looked soft, and still falling. I could understand the kids’ desire to play outside. The ground was a blanket of snow, the neighbors had barely cleared their walkways, if they had bothered to come out at all. The street still hadn’t been plowed. Storm clouds filled the sky, completely obliterating the sky on the eastern horizon. We were in for a second night of snow, hopefully not as much. Hopefully the power would stay on.

Lona and I were stuck here until the roads were clear.

“Hey.” The door opened behind me. “It’s too cold to be out here without a coat. Come back inside. I don’t need you to get sick.”

I followed Kira back inside. She was taking care of us all, even though she was still angry with me. She’d get over her attitude sooner or later, I just hoped it would be sooner.

“Can you check on the kids? They should be waking up pretty soon.” She asked before continuing into the kitchen.

With the kids up, and Kira in the kitchen, it was up to me to entertain them. They had already made a mess decorating the

tree. At least now with the power on, they could watch TV. I sat on the couch with Lona leaning against me and picked up the remote. The TV made the same screaming noise as earlier, so I switched the channel. I got nothing so I shut it off again. I checked my phone, still no signal.

“But the lights are on, the TV should work,” Landon said. I agreed with his logic.

“Unfortunately, kid, that’s not how it works.”

“Can we go outside?” Landon asked.

“No, it’s too cold, and it’s going to get dark soon,” I said.

“I want to watch TV.” Both he and Lona started whining.

“Whining isn’t going to make the cable come back on. Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

“Everything is still down,” I said as I walked into the kitchen.

“No cable, no internet.”

“You could always read.”

“I was reading before the power came back,” I pointed out.

Kira shrugged. “You’re a grown up, you can entertain yourself.”

“I can entertain myself, but I have two whiny kids in there that are expecting me to keep them occupied.”

“Put on a clown suit and dance around,” she said.

“Thanks,” I groaned. I’d have to figure something out.

“There’s a bunch of DVDs in the sideboard behind the couch. Landon has a stack of favorites. I’m surprised he didn’t insist on putting one in. He knows how the DVD player works.”

I turned to leave the kitchen but paused. “Thanks, I don’t know how you do it.”

“I don’t exactly have a choice,” she muttered as I left.

“Landon,” I started as I stepped into the TV room. “You mom said you have a bunch of DVDs.”

“But the TV doesn’t work,” he whimpered.

“The TV turns on. But the cable that brings in the movies and shows, that’s not working. So, if the TV can turn on, your DVD player can turn on too. How about you show me how it works?”

Landon looked excited when I told him the DVD player should work. He and Lona picked out a movie, and Kira was right, he knew exactly how to get everything turned on.

I sat back and felt my brain turn into tapioca pudding as I watched the cartoon. The main character would ask the kids questions and get them engaged with the learning material. I’m sure it was developmentally high-quality material, but it was making my eyeballs roll into the back of my head.

“I’m going to check on your mom,” I said. I didn’t know how much longer I was going to last if I had to help find the blue box, or not fall into the pit.

“Can I help you with dinner?” I asked as I stepped back into the kitchen.

Kira was on her feet, but it seemed like she had just jumped out of a chair. She turned and looked at me. “I wasn’t going to do anything fancy, but sure. There should be some broccoli in the freezer, will you grab that? And a pack of chicken from the fridge.”

I pulled what she wanted while she gathered a cooking dish, and some items from the pantry.

“Chicken and rice okay with you?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Watch, this is super easy, you’ll be able to make it. Set the oven to three-fifty.”

I set the oven, and suddenly my afternoon turned into a cooking class.

“This is one of those easy one dish meals,” she started. “I put some butter in the bottom, not everyone does.” She rubbed the stick of butter directly along the bottom of the dish, back and forth, and then cut a few thin slices.

“You’ll want a cup of dry rice.” She poured the grains directly over the butter.

“Shouldn’t you rinse that?” I asked.

“I guess you could. I know some people who do, but I’ve never rinsed my rice. That’s not going to bother you, is it?”

I shook my head.

She opened the can. “Mushroom soup. Use a little more than half the can,”

She layered in the soup, poured in water, added frozen broccoli and then the chicken. She covered it all with what was left of the canned soup and sprinkled some spices over everything.

“Okay, that’s in. Put it in the oven for about forty-five minutes.”

“That was easy enough,” I said. “That’s all there is to it?”

She nodded. “You have to plan well ahead in your shopping, so you have ingredients like that on hand. It’s a simple enough meal. Kids typically eat it without fussing. Also, it’s only one dish so minimal clean up. I want to bake tonight, so I’m going to need a clean kitchen. I don’t want to spend my evening washing any more dishes than I’m going to have to.”

“You won’t have to do dishes. I can help with those,” I volunteered.

“You know how to clean up?” Her tone was sharp, unforgiving.

“Yeah, my wife. She established the I cook you clean rule. And since I didn’t have a clue about cooking, I learned pretty quickly how to clean a kitchen.”

Later, I was able to prove my cleaning skills. Kira had been right, the chicken and rice was an easy dish to prepare, and the kids didn’t fuss over the food at all.

Kira was brilliant with the kids. She tied aprons on the kids and got them involved in setting everything up. The table was cleared of all evidence of dinner, and it was covered with

measuring spoons and cups. Cookie sheets and cooling racks got stacked on the end of the table. A large cookbook was opened and spread out.

“Oh wait, something is missing,” Kira announced before she stepped out of the kitchen.

A moment later, Christmas music started playing in the TV room.

“That’s better,” she said with a smile. “The DVD plays music CDs. I thought we could use a little holiday spirit in here.”

As if we all let out a collective sigh, the tension between us eased. The kids started giggling, and as I worked on the never-ending influx of bowls and measuring spoons dirtied with cookie ingredients, I found myself humming along.

Kira wasn’t just good with kids. She was good with all of us. Was good for me. We were snowed in, trapped, and still everyone was having a good time. I couldn’t imagine having this much fun with anyone else.

As the smell of baking cookies filled the kitchen, I felt a sense of family that I hadn’t before. My parents were great, they loved me. But they were always formal, and not overly affectionate. Kira didn’t have parents; she had an aunt. I think Angie raised her with more affection and joy for life than my parents had instilled in me.

I leaned on the counter and watched Kira and the kids. My chest filled with warmth and content happiness. The kids looked like they were related. Maybe it was just their dark hair, but there was something about their eyes that looked similar. I shook my head to clear the thought. Lona had Violet’s eyes. Everyone said so. Questioning Kira about Landon had put me on her shit list. I could have handled that better. But if the boy was my child, why wasn’t she saying anything about it?



## KIRA

**D**rake was a dish-washing pro. He kept up at a frenzied pace. The kids and I seemed to get every bowl and spoon dirty simply by looking at them. The kitchen was warm, and cozy filled with the warm scents of cinnamon and sugar.

The kids were done long before the baking was finished.

“I think my kitchen help is about to pass out on their feet. Help me get them to bed?” I asked.

Drake dried his hands and nodded. “Absolutely. Do you need help setting up the blankets in front of the fireplace?”

I shook my head. “No, I think beds tonight. Upstairs there is a nightlight in the hall, so I think the kids will be fine if they get up.”

With a nod, Drake picked up Lona.

I led Landon up by the hand. It might have been easier to carry him, but I was tired after the long day. And I still had to finish baking cookies and put them away. We split duties, I washed off dirty faces, got hands cleaned, and teeth brushed. Drake got them in their pajamas and tucked in.

I leaned against the door as he read to them from Landon’s favorite book. It was a happy family kind of moment; too bad we weren’t a happy little family. But we were. We could be.

The kids fell asleep about halfway through the story. I left before Drake could look up and see me crying.



I busied myself in the kitchen, placing the baked cookies in a tin, and pulling the batch out from the oven to cool. I had enough batter left for one more batch. I was done with baking, so I wrapped up the leftover batter and put it in the fridge.

“It’s still chilly inside here. You know we could share a bed, snuggle up, share body heat.”

Drake’s words were smooth, his grin sly and seductive. But I couldn’t forget his words, did I even know who Landon’s father was?

“I’m too tired to deal with your sense of humor tonight, Drake.”

“Who said I’m trying to be funny?”

“I don’t know what preconceived notions you have about me Drake, but I assure you, they are probably wrong. You can sleep in my room—”

He grinned and puffed his chest. “And yet, I’m sleeping in your bed.”

I let out a sigh and shook my head. “I’m sleeping in Aunt Angie’s room, alone.”

I looked at the last batch of cookies cooling. And the pile of clean dishes in the drying rack. I draped a clean dish towel over the cookies. I’d put everything away in the morning.

“Good night, Drake.”

He captured my hand as I walked past him. I stared down at his hand on mine and then I looked up into his dark eyes. My heart stopped beating, and time froze. It would have been too easy to say yes and let him join me in my bed. I missed his arms around me. It felt like forever.

He leaned forward to kiss me. I turned my head, so his lips grazed across my cheek.

I walked away, my gut twisting and churning. I had to be strong. It would be far too easy to give in to Drake’s charms.

Not until he apologized for his hurtful words.

I climbed the stairs and went to bed.

By the time I woke up the next morning, it had finally stopped snowing. I wasn't the first one up. It turned out that I had slept in. I wrapped myself up in a thick robe and headed down to the kitchen to start breakfast, but when I got there, it was clear that everyone already had their breakfast. There was enough oatmeal left in the pot for me. And the coffee maker was still on and hot.

I heard squealing laughter from outside. I poured myself a mug of hot coffee and went to look out the window. The snow was beaten down with tracks of tiny footprints, and one set of larger footprints.

I crossed to the front of the house to see if they were out front. I couldn't see anyone, but the road had been plowed, and the path to Drake's car freshly dug out. There was a partial clearing from behind his car toward the street, but it wasn't complete.

Drake and the kids were occupied. I ate my breakfast and headed upstairs to take a hot shower. Wrapped in too many towels and my robe, I crossed the hall and into my bedroom to change. I checked my phone, hoping I would have a signal.

I turned it on, and the phone started vibrating and pinging like crazy. I guessed the internet connection was back on. I sat on my bed and started scrolling through my messages. It seemed as if I answered too many of them, 'didn't have a signal, we're okay.'

When I got Sunny's message, I went into more detail with my reply.

'Aunt Angie broke her ankle. Still in hospital. Trapped at my house with Drake and his kid. He's a jerk, but it's actually been fun.'

'Glad you're safe. Check in with Brittney, not so good at her place.' Sunny's next text said.

'Shit, what? You can't drop something like that and not tell me!' My next text was to Brittney.

'Sunny is freaking me out. I've been without a signal. Are you okay?'

I tapped my feet and watched for those three little dots to let me know Brittney was responding.

My phone rang.

“Hey Kira, I thought it would be easier to call.”

My stomach dropped at Brittney’s voice. A phone call meant too much for a text.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine. Mom is in the hospital. Her stupid little dog got out, and she tried to find it.” Brittney sighed. “She’s in County Hospital with hypothermia, and she might lose a toe. When she finally gave up and went back inside, she didn’t have any power or heat, so she never warmed back up.”

“Oh Brittney, I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, no I think—”

“Brittney, seriously. The roads are clear, and I’m almost dug out. I’m gonna bring over some food. Are you staying at your mom’s?” Her mother’s house was closer than her apartment, I just needed to know where to take the food.

“I will be once they let her out of the hospital.”

“Okay, I’m going to throw some meals together for you and leave them on the porch. They’ll be fine in this cold but get them put up when you can. Did she ever find her dog?”

“The stupid mutt was at the neighbors.”

As soon as my call with Brittney ended, I called Aunt Angie. I hated that Brittney’s mother had a hard time with it. I needed to know Aunt Angie was safe.

“Good morning,” Aunt Angie answered her room phone.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m doing just fine, Kira.”

My heart soared hearing that news.

“Are they going to let you out? Our road has been plowed. I might be able to come and get you today.”

“That would be lovely, but it seems that this storm wasn’t good for my tension. My blood pressure is sky high.”

“But you don’t have high blood pressure,” I mentioned.

“I’m aware of that. The doctor doesn’t want to risk it. I’m in for at least another night.”

“Is your blood pressure that high?”

“Between that and the storm, they aren’t sending me home until power is back on everywhere. I’m being well cared for here. Don’t worry about me.”

“I think I’m the one who needs to tell you not to worry about us. We are safe, and warm.”

“Oh, the nurse is here to check on me. I need to let you go. I’ll call if anything changes. I love you, give Landon a big hug from me.”

“Love you too.” I ended the call.

I finished drying my hair and headed back downstairs. Drake and the kids were inside again. They sat close to the fire, warming their hands and stocking feet.

Drake looked up and smiled. I tried to return the smile, but I didn’t feel like I could.

He stood and quietly led me into the kitchen. “Are you okay? Did something happen?”

I rubbed my arms against the all-pervasive chill. “I found out that my friend’s mother got frostbite and is in the hospital because of the storm. I just feel so helpless knowing that others weren’t as lucky as we were. I mean we had a fire and heat, and food.”

I paced around the kitchen. I wasn’t sure where to start.

“We were out this morning.” Drake started.

“Yeah, I heard. Sounded like you were having fun.”

“It was like the entire street was out checking on each other. Your neighbor, Candace, she asked after Angie. I told her Angie was doing well and being kept safe in the hospital.”

I nodded, that was good. It was good everyone on the block was okay. But I still felt hopeless. I started to clean up the breakfast dishes.

“I’m going to go warm up with the kids,” Drake said with a shrug before leaving me.

I sat down and cried. I wiped my eyes and hated that I was crying when nothing bad had happened to us. I needed a plan. I needed to be doing something.

Right, I was going to feed my friend. I pulled out a stack of tin foil cooking pans from the pantry. I had a large bag of frozen chicken breasts, and plenty of rice. The simple rice dish I showed Drake how to make was an excellent stand by recipe when in times of doubt.

I started a large pot to boil some noodles. I would make a spaghetti bake for Brittney, and one for us for dinner tonight. What else should I make her? I could take her some cookies.

That’s exactly what I would do. I still had more than enough ingredients to make a dozen more batches of cookies. And I still had the dough in the fridge.

With the dinners started, I pulled out all the ingredients for the cookies and started a massive batch.

Drake came back into the kitchen. He was looking at his phone. “Kira, I found something I think you’ll be interested in.”

I looked up at him. I really wasn’t in the mood for more of his playing, but he sounded serious.

“They’ve cancelled the Christmas Village and are asking for volunteers who can help out, to gather at the school gym. It looks like they are organizing a relief effort.” He held his phone out to me, showing me the information.

“Can we go?” I asked.

“Of course, we can go. You need to help, we’ll go help.”



## DRAKE

Lona and I stayed with Kira and Landon another night. I liked being with her, even if she was terse with me. The kids loved being together. And when Kira let her guard down, her laughter and warmth filled me with a contentment I cherished.

Going home, to my home, felt like I would be giving up something important. The house would be cavernous and empty without the constant giggles of small children, or the homely warmth that Kira brought with her when we were all together.

Frankly, I didn't want to go home without her. She didn't kick us out, so we stayed. With Angie still in the hospital, Kira and I continued to sleep in separate beds. Not my favorite plan, but when I woke up, I was surrounded by her scent, and her items. It made me feel like I had a connection to her, like I understood her better.

I got out of bed and checked on the kids. It was time for them to get up, it was time for all of us to get up. I smelled coffee and decided to let the kids sleep for a few minutes longer. Downstairs I found Kira curled up in front of the cold fireplace, she had a cup of coffee in her hands.

"Good morning." I wanted to kiss her, greet her like my lover. I hated this divide forming between us.

"The pot is fresh," she said.

"Thanks. Do you want me to stir the fire up?"

“Oh, no. It needs to die out completely. We can start it back up when we get back.” She had a good point. It wouldn’t be smart to start up a fire knowing we were leaving the house for the day.

I walked into the kitchen and poured myself a fresh mug before joining her on the couch.

“What time do you want to head over to the gym?” I asked.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“For what? I haven’t done anything.” I couldn’t think of anything I had done that warranted being thanked first thing in the morning.

“For going to the gym with me. For helping others when they need help.”

“It’s clear to me that you need to be helpful, and not just sit around and worry about something you can’t fix. You want to be out there doing your part to fix it. Look, this is all going to help our neighbors. Millers Glen is a small town. There are more people here that are going to need our help, and odds are we are going to know them. It’s not like we’re reaching out to strangers. These are our friends and their families. What would you think of me if I said no?”

Kira shrugged.

“No matter what you actually think of me, this is my hometown too. These are my friends too.” I set my coffee down. “I’m going to take a quick shower and then get the kids up. Does that work with you?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I’ll get breakfast started. It will be hot and ready by the time everyone comes back downstairs.”

A few hours later we bundled up and left the house for the first time in days. Snowplows had driven through all of the streets leaving high piles of dirty snow. It was going to take weeks for all of it to melt. I drove slowly, even though my car was highly rated for driving in snowy and wet conditions.

Kira watched out the window. There were a few places where tree branches were down, but other than all of the snow, there



really didn't look to be too much damage to property.

The few snowmen out on front lawns that we passed made me smile. Apparently, Landon was looking for them as he pointed them out with enthusiasm every time we passed one.

“Another snowman! Can we make one?”

“That might be fun for this afternoon,” Kira suggested.

I agreed, making a snowman with the kids would be fun. Maybe Kira would join us, and she would smile at me again.

“And then after we can have hot chocolate.”

“And marshmallows?” Lona asked, only it didn't exactly sound like the word. She tried, but it came out sounding like ‘mamamalow.’

“Of course, always, marshmallows.”

The high school gym was a hive of activity when we arrived. And we showed up fairly early.

“Oh good, more volunteers!” A cheerful round cheeked lady said as she greeted us. “Hello little ones. We have childcare over on the far side under the Winter Ball banner. You look big and strong, so we'll need your help with carrying boxes.” She checked her clipboard before asking if Kira had a nut allergy.

“No, why?”

“We need sandwich makers, my last two volunteers can't work with peanut butter,” the woman explained.

“I can make peanut butter sandwiches,” Kira said with an eager nod.

Her entire demeanor changed once we arrived. She was here and able to actually do something productive.

I was happy to help out, but really, I was only here because Kira was.

“Why don't you go start making sandwiches. I'll get the kids checked in.”

Kira gripped my arm and smiled into my eyes. “Thank you.”

I nodded. Her smile, no matter how small, warmed my chest. I watched her as she walked in the opposite direction that the kids and I would be heading. She was an amazing woman. Strong, smart, beautiful, and fiercely protective.

“Okay kids, let’s go see what they have for you to do today.” I helped them off with their jackets as we crossed the gymnasium.

I signed them in on a clipboard, giving Lona a kiss, and ruffling Landon’s hair. I knew they would be fine. There were coloring books and building blocks. And Landon was there to watch after Lona.

Letting out a heavy breath, I crossed over to an area where some guys were carrying boxes out through the double doors.

“Mr. Schriver!” Ted lifted his hand in a brief wave.

“Ted, how have you fared in all of this?” I asked.

“We came through in good shape. I have a generator, so we didn’t feel the effects of the power outage. How are things at the house?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. The power and the heat were out the first night. Lona and I have been staying with Kira. It keeps the kids occupied. So, a generator? That’s something I think I might need at the house.”

“For the square footage you have, you might need something bigger than what I have.” He tapped his lips as he thought.

“Why don’t you look into that for me? On the clock. The house could use some other updates, it would be good to have you go through and give it an assessment,” I said.

He smiled and nodded. “I could do that. There are some updates you might want to consider outside too.”

He genuinely looked pleased.

I ended up carrying boxes of supplies into the gym for other volunteers to sort into other boxes. There were easy to cook food items, and blankets, hats and scarves, and what seemed like millions of those little chemical hand warmer packs.

“If you could set the boxes with the hand warmers at the other end, that will help the assembly line.”

I was directed where to put the boxes.

I hauled in items for the relief kits, and when the trucks bringing those items were empty, there were more trucks delivering even more food and goods.

I delivered several large crates of oranges to the sack lunch area.

“How is sandwich making?” I asked when I got a chance to talk to Kira.

“I don’t think I want to ever make another peanut butter and jelly sandwich again. I got jelly on my cuff, and now my wrist is sticky,” she said with a laugh.

“They’ve done a great job of organizing this on such short notice,” I said.

“I think that’s what they do. You know, organize relief efforts and coordinate volunteers to the work that’s needed. Thanks again for coming down here with me,” she said.

“Any time. Any time. I need to go unload some more trucks. Come find me when you’re done.”

After hours of hauling boxes, the process moved like a finely tuned machine. I scanned the area to see if there was another box for me to carry outside to the cars that we were loading up with all of the goods. Volunteers had big off-road capable trucks and snowmobiles to help deliver the boxes of items. I waited until more boxes were ready so I could carry two at a time. When I came back into the gym, Kira was waiting for me.

“We ran out of bread, so I’m being sent home. Do you need any help?” she asked.

“Hey, we’ve got more than enough hands if you want to head home,” the same woman who had given us our assignments said.

“Why don’t we get the kids and go make that snowman we promised them?” I suggested.

Kira walked in front of me, and we went to get the kids from the play area the volunteers had set up. It was smart to have a couple volunteers watch kids, more people could come and help.

The town would have shown up for the festival day that had been planned. And they turned out to help when it was needed. The atmosphere while we all worked together had been almost festive. It may not have been a fun filled holiday celebration, but it felt like the spirit of the holiday was present.

Kira approached the kid's area first.

"Did you check your child in?" the volunteer asked. She was an older lady, different from the one who I had dropped them off with.

Kira pointed over her shoulder and me. "No, but he did."

"Oh, my yes. I know exactly which two are your children. They look just like you."

"Mommy!" Landon called out and ran to Kira with a big hug.

"Oh you were just a clone machine for your husband weren't you?"

Kira's back went stiff.

I started to protest, but there was something about Kira's expression that stopped me. She didn't say anything correcting the other woman.

"I see you in his nose, and your daughter's eyes. But really, your husband's genetics are very strong in the kids. You made very pretty babies, such a good-looking couple. Well, thank you for all your hard work today." She just kept talking.

And Kira didn't stop her.

I didn't either. I could have said something at any point. Lona didn't have Kira's eyes. She had her mothers. And Landon did have Kira's small nose. And both kids did look like me. There was a reason we felt like a family when we were together. We were one.



## KIRA

I froze. Absolutely froze in panic. I hadn't realized how obvious it would be to other people that Landon and Lona were brother and sister. I saw the resemblance because I thought I was looking for one.

"Here are their coats." The lady minding the kids handed their coats out to me.

All I could do was stare at them. Those were coats, what was I supposed to be doing? After a few awkward moments of me not doing anything, Drake reached past me and took the coats.

"Thank you." I could hear the spikes of frigid anger in his voice. He was trying to hold himself back.

"Landon, put your coat on." Drake's words were functional, we had to put coats on and leave. He was doing his best to keep emotion out of his voice. I think I was the only one who could hear it.

Landon struggled for a minute before I snapped out of my stupor. I helped him with his coat. It was like moving through mud. I moved slowly and had to force myself to pick up my arms.

"Did you have a good time, Lona?" Drake asked his daughter.

She began babbling. Half of her words were unintelligible. I was barely able to pay attention, so I didn't really understand her.

Landon seemed to pick up that Lona's words were still mostly baby babble. He started talking.

“They had blocks, and we made a big tower. And then Skylar from school came over and he knocked it over because he wanted to make a rocket with them. I didn’t want to because he knocked over the tower and I thought Lona was going to cry, but Skylar said please. So, we made rockets. And we flew them to the moon. Zoom! Then the lady told us we couldn’t run around, and she found puzzles, so we did puzzles. They gave us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and oranges for lunch.” Landon talked nonstop, only letting Lona get a few words in every now and again.

We followed Drake to the car.

He still didn’t say anything. His nostrils flared, and he growled low in his throat every now and again. He wouldn’t even look at me.

My stomach twisted, and my throat burned. I had fucked up. This was all my fault. I might have ruined everything. Hell, I was out of a job. I blinked back tears. If there was ever a fuck my life moment, this was one of them. I hadn’t felt this lost and hopeless since the time I found out I was pregnant, and Drake was gone. I didn’t know what to do then, and I didn’t know what to do now.

I should have told him.

I tried to look at him while he drove us through town and back to my house. His lips were pursed, and his eyes narrowed. The muscle in his jaw pulsed as he clenched and unclenched his teeth together.

Landon and Lona had continued to talk. I wasn’t paying attention, so I didn’t notice when the car got quiet. I was only aware that the roaring sound of my pulse in my ears had somehow gotten louder.

I twisted in my seat to look at the kids. Lona was mostly asleep, and Landon looked like he might fall asleep any minute.

I didn’t dare say anything to Drake. I didn’t want to set him off, but we needed to talk. I didn’t want to talk with little ears around.

Drake pulled into the driveway but didn't turn off the engine.

"Are you going to come in?" I asked.

He wouldn't even look at me. His face was a mask of pinched anger. He kept his gaze straight forward.

"Okay," I said before climbing out of the car.

I got Landon unbuckled.

"Isn't Lona coming?" he asked.

"She's asleep. They haven't been to their home for days. They need to go home. Give Lona a gentle hug, but don't wake her." I was as truthful and as calm as I could manage.

"Bye Lona," Landon whispered. "Bye Drake," he said before jumping out of the car.

"Bye, Landon." At least Drake spoke to Landon.

"I get that you don't want to talk to me, but will you at least listen?" I started.

"You've had plenty of opportunities to talk to me, you chose not to. And when I asked you, I asked you, you treated me as if I insulted you." He let his anger seep into his words. He didn't yell but I felt the scathing heat of his anger.

"I'm done listening." Drake turned on the car radio. Not loudly, but I got the message. I was not someone he was interested in hearing at the moment, or ever. I closed the car door.

He at least waited until I stepped away from the car before backing out of the drive.

I sucked on the inside of my cheek and tried to keep from crying. It was so cold out; I wouldn't be surprised if my tears froze to my face. The cold zapped my energy, but it seemed to revive Landon. He was running through the snow and falling on his back to make snow angels.

"Can we make a snowman?"

I didn't have the heart to tell him no, and I needed a distraction. We managed to roll a large base of snow. And



somehow the two of us got a very heavy second snowball into position.

“Hey, sweetie. I need to finish digging out the car, why don’t you finish up the snowman on your own?”

Landon was happy to keep himself entertained while I went around to the side of the house with the breezeway and got out the shovel and broom to clear snow off my car.

It was hard work, and somehow it made me warm in all of this cold. Drake had started to dig my car out. So, I only needed to finish the job. I hadn’t really thought about needing my car until I realized if Aunt Angie got sent home, I’d have no way of picking her up.

“Mommy, I need help!”

Landon rolled a large snowball for the head but couldn’t lift it. I trudged over and picked the head up and placed it on top. He had a fairly decent snowman.

“I don’t know if you’ll be able to find any branches for arms, but you can use some of the wood chips in the woodshed to make a face. I’m almost done with the car.”

By the time Landon found what he needed to put a face on his creation, I was done and ready to drink some hot chocolate and curl up under a blanket. I took a picture of his snowman with his phone and sent it to Aunt Angie’s phone, forgetting that she left it upstairs.

“Last one inside has to make the hot chocolate!” I called out.

Landon raced for the door.

“Beat you!” he laughed.

“Yes, you did.” I wanted to laugh, but all I managed was a weak smile.

While he took his coat and boots off, I went into the kitchen and started our hot chocolate. I gave Aunt Angie a call in the hospital as I stirred the hot milk.

“Are they going to let you come home? The roads are cleared, and I even have the car dug out.”

“I think they are going to let me go home tomorrow. The nurse was making noise about it this morning, but it’s already too late in the day.”

“That’s fabulous. It will be so good to have you home. I’ve been worried.”

“You don’t need to be worried about me. They are taking good care of me. I’ll give you a call when I know if they are going to discharge me.”

I ended the call and finished the hot chocolate, making sure to put extra marshmallows in Landon’s mug.

He had a movie on TV by the time I carried our mugs out to the TV room.

“Mommy, you’re still wearing your coat.”

I was. I guess I hadn’t realized I was so focused on getting everything taken care of.

“Silly me.” I took my coat and boots off and tossed them in the same pile with Landon’s stuff. At the moment I didn’t care. I didn’t even care that he hadn’t put his things away.

“Mommy, you left your coat on the floor.”

I looked at him and bugged my eyes out and then rolled them the same way he did to me. “So?”

With a huff he climbed off the couch and stomped over to the front door and picked up my coat and hung it up, and then he hung up his coat, and put our snow boots next to the door.

“We put stuff away around here,” he echoed the words I said to him often back to me.

If I had realized acting like a child about my coat would have gotten my son to hang his up responsibly, I would have tried mimicking him earlier.

“Thanks for putting that stuff away. Come here.” I held out the blanket, inviting him in to cuddle with me.

We drank our hot chocolate and watched the movie. At some point he fell asleep and snuggled up to me. There were fewer and fewer days he would snuggle and sleep on me. My baby

boy was growing up into a fine kid. I wiped away the tears that formed and held him close.

I must have fallen asleep too, because when I woke up the DVD Landon selected was looping back on the start menu. I carefully climbed off the couch, making sure to tuck the blanket back around his sleeping body. I hit play, so the familiar sound he had fallen asleep to would help to keep him asleep.

I started dinner, and then braved the stairs to the basement. I really didn't like it down there. It was cold and smelled mushy.

I found the box with the wrapping paper and dragged it back upstairs and took it all the way to my room. I'd finally have a chance to start wrapping presents tonight after Landon went to bed.

I stared at my half-made bed. It still had the ruffled outline of where Drake had slept.

With angry tears blurring my vision, I stripped my bed, and then Landon's. I also stripped Aunt Angie's bed too, she deserved a clean bed with fresh linens after her stay in the hospital.

I didn't have time to finish the cleaning I started until after dinner. I barely got Landon's bed made before he woke from his nap. I finished making the beds while he watched a different movie. We ate dinner. I watched the same movie with him again. After I put Landon to bed, I was alone for the first time in days. I didn't like the way it felt.

I texted Drake. 'I'm sorry, I fucked up, didn't I?'

I didn't expect a reply, but I hoped for one.



## DRAKE

**M**illers Glen had been a complete mistake. Kira had been a mistake. I didn't need her drama, and I didn't need her lies. If she was withholding information from me, I was plenty fine with her keeping her secrets. I wasn't going to be around.

It didn't take me very long to pack bags for Lona and me. I opened my laptop and shot a quick message to the office.

'Where have you been?' Rob Kelly messaged me back immediately.

'Trapped in the snow. Don't you watch the news?'

'That's where you live? Didn't realize. Everything okay?'

'All's good.' I texted back. 'Headed back to the city. Will be in the office on Monday.' Even if I drove all night to get there, the office wouldn't be open over the weekend.

Rob responded. 'All hands-on deck meetings?'

'Sounds about right.'

My life was suddenly a lot quieter now that it was just Lona and I again. I didn't realize I would miss the sound of other people. My chest felt hollow, and I couldn't get warm. Something was missing.

The drive into the city was uneventful. There was a dramatic change in the weather once we drove out of the line of the storm that had dumped so much snow.

New York City hadn't changed in my time away. Not that I had expected it to. The apartment was dark and quiet. Lona's bedroom lacked a certain comfort and charm from the one we had made for her at the house. Kira had done a bit of work, making the room have character and charm.

I felt a pang of guilt like a jab in the gut. Violet had a very different sense of style than Kira. Violet had been all business and function. Smooth surfaces and cool colors, much like her personality.

Lona was pulling out toys that I had mostly forgotten about as I stood there and gazed around. I let out a long heavy breath. How different my life would have been these past three years had Violet and my parents survived.

"Landon?" Lona asked.

"No, sweet girl, Landon's not here." I picked her up and she held out a book to me.

I took it, it was the same book that Landon liked to read to her.

"Want Landon. Read." She began to whimper and sniffle.

Damn it. She had really grown fond of him. They had formed a bond. They were best friends, and I had taken her away from the only friend she had known.

"I'll read it." I carried her out to the TV room. She'd forget Landon easily and soon. I wish I could forget Kira as easily.

I read the book, Lona stopping and pointing out the different characters, and pretending to eat the picture of the pie. For her, the picture book was an interactive experience, and not just words and pictures on a page.

We read the book a second time through, and I remembered when to feed her the pie, and pet the doggie.

"Are you, my doggie?"

She panted like a puppy when I patted her on the head. She giggled. It was a beautiful sound that I hadn't heard since she had been alone without Landon.

Was he really her brother, my son? He was protective of her enough. But I was willing to let that stay a mystery. I had a business to run and no time to dwell in the past. I learned that focusing on the what ifs only lead to despair. I wasn't going to what-if my life away over a woman who didn't trust me enough to admit I was the father of her child.

Lona and I read several more books before I ordered delivery for dinner. We ate noodles and sesame chicken directly out of the to-go containers. Lona thought that was great fun. I was probably teaching her bad habits, but at least we ate.

After I put her to bed, the apartment was even more quiet, austere, bleak. I looked out over the city lights. Everything was bright, and I caught glimpses of Christmas decorations. I chuckled. Millers Glen had been blanketed in Christmas decoration before it was covered in snow.

The apartment had zero evidence that there was a holiday in just a few days. That needed to be fixed. I hadn't done anything for Lona. Not that she would have noticed or remembered. I had not been in a Christmas mood for a few years. I wasn't sure if I was in one now, or if it had been thrust upon me once I moved back to Millers Glen.

The next morning, I discovered that the cleaners who came in after I left were very thorough about cleaning out any food. There wasn't even a can of soup in the cupboard. Nothing like not having food in the house to feel like one was failing at the whole parental thing.

Fortunately, New York had an abundance of restaurants and diners that served breakfast. Taking Lona out for breakfast was a great start to our day.

We needed some decorations, including a tree. I also had to buy presents. Could I buy them in front of Lona? Would she notice? Would she remember watching me buy them if she opened them on Christmas morning?

We were in New York, and it was Christmas, so of course we went to Macy's. Where else would Lona get a chance to meet the "real" Santa. At least I could get that part right, take my little girl to the top Santa presentation in town.

We started out on the sidewalk on West 34th Street looking at the window displays. We weren't the only people who had come to do exactly this. I fought through the crowds so that Lona could look at the displays. Each window was an elaborate diorama of a fantastical scene. Magical mice and friendly bears decorated Christmas trees. Other small creatures worked on polishing the sleigh that would deliver presents to all the children of the world on December twenty fifth.

They were cute. But to Lona, they were enchanting. Her eyes reflected all the sparkle from the lights and all the magic. She kept pointing out new little details, and there were so many details like tiny electric trains that seemed to puff real steam from the smokestack, or a family of tiny mice having tea and cakes with a fairy in the corner. The designers of these scenes really out did themselves.

Lona didn't just look and move on, she studied each window, not letting me move on to the next one until she was done.

After the windows, we headed inside and up to the floor with the toy department, and more importantly, Santa's winter wonderland display. The place was insane. It was a madhouse of Children dressed up for pictures. Half of them were excited and yelling, the other half seemed over-stimulated and having meltdowns. There was as much crying as there were giggles.

I held Lona as we walked through the aisles of toys that led up to the meet and greet and photo-op. It was hot. I needed to take my coat off. I helped Lona off with hers. I held the coats in one arm, and for a while I just held her hand. But she tried to get away from me to play with the toys she saw. I couldn't have her getting away, so I carried her for the rest of the time.

I made mental notes of what toys seemed to interest her the most. She liked things that sparkled and seemed to be drawn to stuffed animals with big eyes.

After what felt like hours and hours of waiting, we were finally the next family in line.

"What's your name?" the helper dressed like an elf asked.

Lona just stared at the young woman.



“Her name is Lona.” I set Lona down, and the elf helped Lona climb onto Santa’s lap. She didn’t know what to make of the man in the red velvet suit with the full white beard.

“So, little Lona, ho, ho, ho. Have you been a good girl this year?” The actor they had spoken with a thick hearty voice, and even said the whole ‘ho-ho-ho’ thing.

Lona looked back at me; her eyes wide with panic. I nodded.

She turned back to Santa and nodded her answer.

“What do you want for Christmas this year?”

Lona blinked and then, much to my surprise, she answered him. “Landon, read. Want Landon read.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. She wanted Landon back. Santa did a great job of not looking terribly confused, but he clearly didn’t know what anything she said meant. On the other hand, I knew exactly what she wanted. She missed Landon so much it hurt.

“Lona, Santa, smile!” The helper elf called out and then I heard the clicking sound of the camera taking pictures. She handed me a ticket. “You can pick up the pints in five minutes, or you can purchase digital copies. Just give the cashier this ticket so you get the right photos.”

I thanked her, and Santa released Lona to come back to me. The lines leading away from Santa put us in the direction of the cashier stand.

I bought pictures, and realized that technically, these were the first Christmas photos I ever had of Lona. Another parent failure on my behalf. I bet Kira had pictures of Landon for every Christmas of his life.

I was tired and cranky by the time we walked out of Macy’s. Lona was too. I took advantage of our time in the department store to buy some decorations and presents. But we needed food, and I still didn’t have a Christmas tree for the apartment.

I hailed a taxi, there was no way I was walking home. Not when both of us were tired.

“You don’t know where I can get a Christmas tree, do you?” I asked as Lona and I climbed into the back of the taxi.



## KIRA

“Kira, Kira!” Aunt Angie hollered for me from the front living room.

I was all the way in the kitchen. Had that been Landon, I would have scolded him for yelling at me, and told him he is capable of getting up and finding me. But Aunt Angie wasn't capable of getting up very easily.

I pushed open the kitchen door and yelled back. “Give me a second, or is this an emergency?”

“It can wait.”

It could always wait. She'd been home a day, and while it made my heart happy to have her home and safe where I could see her, it was wearing me out. She wasn't allowed to put any weight on that foot at all. Her bedroom was upstairs, and the bathroom too far to hop into. Not that Aunt Angie could or should be hopping on one foot.

I sat back down to finish my hot chocolate made with coffee. I wasn't sure if it was technically a mocha or not, since I always thought of mocha as coffee with some chocolate stirred in. This was two packets of hot chocolate mix, and instead of milk or water, I used coffee. It was decadent and felt like a treat. A treat I had started making myself the morning after Drake drove away and I didn't know how I was supposed to function. I still didn't know how I was functioning other than everyone needed me to. I didn't have a choice.

“Aunt Angie has been struggling with her crutches. I think she's going to fall and get hurt worse.” I texted in the group

chat I had with Brittney and Sunny.

‘Respite care at a nursing home?’ Sunny asked.

‘No, I can take care of her. Just worried.’

‘We’re getting mom one of those knee roller carts. When they release her, she’ll be able to get around.’ Brittney suggested.

‘Send me a link.’ I demanded.

“Kira!”

‘Got to go. We need to have drinks at the Dugout next week, after Christmas madness has passed.’ I texted.

‘Yes!’ I didn’t see who sent it as I dropped my phone and headed to the front of the house.

“Sorry, do you need help?” I asked.

Aunt Angie was tucked up on the couch in the living room. She had a small folding dinner tray next to her with drinks, painkillers, a stack of books and her cross stitch. She didn’t want to sit in the TV room while Landon watched movies. She found them too distracting. Besides, she could look out the big picture window at the world. Her view was nothing but snow, and the occasional car on the street. But it’s what she wanted.

“Do you have to use the bathroom?”

“No, I was hoping to get some more coffee.” She held up her mug.

“You know you can send Landon to bring you drinks.”

“He’s such a busy little man, I didn’t want to disturb him,” she said.

“He’s watching TV and playing with his Legos. He’s disturb-able.”

“What are you doing in the kitchen all by yourself? I don’t smell any cookies, so you aren’t baking.”

“I’m looking for a new job,” I lied. I should have been looking for a new job, but what I was doing was wallowing in self-pity, drinking far too much chocolate laden coffee, and simply feeling sorry for myself where no one could see my

misery, and yet still be available to be everyone's personal assistant. I wasn't in a good head space, and my Christmas cheer was completely gone.

"I thought you had a job watching Lona. I thought there might have been something brewing between you and that Drake. You shouldn't get involved with your employer, nothing good ever comes from that."

"Yeah, well, you're right. Nothing good, that's for certain."

I picked up her coffee mug and refilled it with straight coffee. She liked three teaspoons of sugar and a splash of milk. I brought it back and insisted that I help her to the bathroom.

"I'm here now let's take care of it," I said.

"You're bossing me around like I'm a toddler," she complained.

"Sorry, habit."

She had her arm over my shoulder, and I wrapped my arms around her waist. She put all of her weight on me with each hop. It was slow and physically challenging for both of us.

"You know Brittney suggested we get one of those scooters you can put your knee on."

"Why would we need that?" Aunt Angie asked.

"Because this is hard, and you can't put weight on that foot. I think it will be a lot easier for everyone."

"How is a scooter going to help me go up and down the stairs?"

"It won't, but it will help you feel more independent, and you won't need to rely on me to get you to the bathroom."

"You're going to do it anyway, so I won't argue with you." She sounded so resigned and, I don't know, disappointed in my choices.

I was disappointed in the situation with Drake, I thought the scooter was a brilliant idea.

I waited outside of the bathroom for her to do her business. She opened the door, and I got back under her shoulder, and by her side. It was awkward maneuvering around and getting Aunt Angie through the door.

“I’ll call the medical supply place and see if I can pick it up while I’m out running errands.”

“Last minute Christmas shopping?” she asked.

“You could say that. I need to return some things.”

I had done some Christmas shopping for Drake. I wanted to take those things over to his house, but now I would stop having to think about him. I had also bought presents for him and Lona. And Landon had a present to deliver to Lona too. I wanted to deliver our presents for Lona, but I was going to return my gift for Drake to the store. What I had was anti shopping.

“I need to pick a few last-minute things up at the grocery store. I really don’t want to go tomorrow, you know. Tomorrow is for making pies and eating too many cookies. If you need me to pick anything up, make a list.”

“When are you going out?”

“After lunch. I’ll leave Landon here with you so he can nap, you can nap too. It’ll be faster without him.”

I got her back on the couch and returned to the kitchen. I opened my laptop and launched the job search website. I hated lying to Aunt Angie. So, I looked up my previously saved search. While it processed, I opened another browser tab and found the contact information for the medical supply company.

“Watertown Medical Supply, can I help you?” They picked up on the first ring.

“A friend of mine suggested you to me. Do you rent out those kneeling scooters? My aunt broke her ankle and crutches are too hard for her.”

“We do, and I have some in stock, would you like to reserve one for pick up?”

“Absolutely. Can I pick it up this afternoon? How late are you open?”

I got all the information I needed, including directions. They weren't too far from the Sam's Club. And I gave them all of my credit card and contact information.

That was one item off my to-do list I could check off. I should probably make a to-do list, so I didn't forget what it was I was doing. I got up and rummaged through the junk drawer, I knew there was a notepad in there, and a pen.

I made my list. As I included my grocery needs, it became two lists, things to do and things to buy.

I wrote down 'apply for job,' sighed, woke my laptop back up, refreshed the job search site, and submitted my resume to the first job listing it suggested that I hadn't already applied for.

With that done, I checked it off my to-do list, and let out a sigh, task complete, and I had not lied to Aunt Angie after all.

Lunch was ravioli from a can. Landon loved it, it was probably his favorite. I didn't mind it either. It actually tasted good. And it wasn't peanut butter and jelly. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to make another sandwich with jelly on it again. I could still feel the stickiness on my wrist as if I still had jelly on it.

With everyone tucked up on different couches for naps, I quietly collected the presents and loaded them into the car.

'I'm bringing the presents over. I'll leave them by the front door. Just wanted to let you know.' I texted him, even though I knew he wouldn't text me back. I wanted him to know that I was fulfilling the job he had paid me for.

My first stop was Drake's house. Ted wasn't in the guard house, so I continued up the drive as far as I could. It had been dug out at one point, but there was fresh snow covering everything.

I could see the house from where I stopped. I thought about getting out and hauling the stuff across the snow to the porch, but the porch wasn't even swept. Was Drake even here?



As I backed out of the drive, Ted pulled up alongside the guard house. He and Lee Ann climbed out of their truck.

“Hey Kira, what are you doing here?” Ted greeted me.

“I have some stuff to deliver to Drake. But the house looks empty.”

“It is empty. Didn’t Drake tell you?” Lee Ann asked. “He’s gone back to the city. Hired me and Ted to shut the house down for the rest of the season. I guess that snowstorm was too much for him and the kid.”

“It’s a real shame because the new generator he asked me to get came in, and I’m all ready to install it, but there doesn’t seem to be a need to do so anymore.” Ted said as he slapped a large box in the bed of his truck.

“Well, I guess he forgot to say anything about it.” Thanks. You two have a Merry Christmas.”

“You too, say hi to your aunt for us,” Lee Ann called out as I drove away.

What was I supposed to do with everything now? I guess I’d have to return it. The receipts were in an envelope in my purse, so that wouldn’t be a problem. However, everything was wrapped for Christmas morning. I’d have to carefully unwrap the gifts before I could return them. I didn’t have time for that today. I needed to pick up a scooter and still go grocery shopping.

Drake was ruining my Christmas completely. Now I worried if Lona would get any presents at all.



## DRAKE

Christmas in the City came with stress and pressure. Trying to make sure Lona had the perfect Christmas experience, I pushed us both to the limits. I crammed everything I could into the very few days before I returned to the office.

In the morning as I was getting myself ready, I let Lona sleep. She had to be completely exhausted if she slept in. I didn't know what I was going to do with her today. I didn't have a nanny organized. I hadn't even had time to call an agency and make arrangements.

After I was dressed, and made myself coffee, I woke Lona up. She was sleepy and clingy all morning. All she wanted to do was to have me hold her.

I got her ready, fed her breakfast, and managed to leave on time. I had scheduled a meeting with my executive staff, and it would look bad if I was the one to arrive late.

Lona looked adorable in a red dress with a frilly skirt. But looking adorable apparently wasn't going to help me out.

"Hello Drake. How are you this morning? Good morning, Lona." Andrea smiled and greeted us. "Lona has certainly gotten bigger since the last time you brought her into the office. Is it 'bring your daughter to work' today?"

"No, I don't have anyone to look after her. Look, I've got a meeting starting in less than fifteen," I started.

"I know. You didn't let me know your agenda, so I wasn't able to prepare anything for you. There is coffee and doughnuts in

the Omega Conference Room.”

“Good, good. I’ve got everything I need here. Look, I need you to watch Lona—” I shifted, prepared to hand Lona over to my assistant.

Instead of reaching out to take the child as I expected her to do she put her hands up in a stop gesture. I stopped mid-pass off.

Lona whimpered and grabbed me tighter.

“I don’t do kids. Not only is it not in my job description at all, but no.”

“What do you mean you don’t do kids?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you Mr. Schriver”— Shit, she called me Mr. Schriver. That meant she was as serious as she could be. “But this is a hard line, and I will not allow you to cross it.”

“Oh, come on, Andrea. Be a team player.”

Our gazes locked, and we had a bit of a stare down. It ended when she moved and started to pull items from her desk drawer.

“I will let Human Resources know of my resignation. I’m sorry, but I simply cannot watch your child while you are in a meeting.”

I stood there flabbergasted. She would rather leave her job of five years rather than watch Lona for a couple of hours. As she gathered more things together, her face pinched together.

“Andrea, wait, stop. You don’t have to quit over this, I’ll figure something out. Please stop. Please.”

She straightened and looked at me. Her expression was flat, but I could see the pinch of stress around her eyes and corners of her mouth.

“Mr. Schriver?”

I let out a heavy breath. “I overstepped. Next time when you tell me your limitations I will listen. I’m desperate, but this is my problem, not yours.”

She nodded and returned to her chair. “Can I make a suggestion?” she asked.

“You know I value your input.” And I did. She was a smart woman, and she knew this business.

“You aren’t the first person to ever get stuck not having someone to watch their child who works here. We lose work hours to parents who need childcare and can’t work remotely for whatever reason. This place needs onsite childcare, both full time and emergency daycare.”

“And I thought you didn’t do kids,” I chuckled.

“I don’t, but I’ve worked with people who do. And it seems like you’re receptive to the suggestion.”

“I have a meeting, and that is an idea that needs to happen. Can I put you in charge of getting the right team together for that?”

“Probably an HR thing,” she said as she looked away, thinking. “Yes, I will find out who to get on this. Drake, thank you.”

At least we were back on a first name basis. I readjusted Lona on my hip and took the elevators back down a floor to the Omega Conference Room, where I was supposed to lead a master planning session.

I walked in on a mostly empty conference room. There were more boxes of doughnuts than there were people waiting for me. I grabbed a pad off the table and a handful of pens and highlighters. I set Lona on the floor, in the corner.

“Okay, Lona. I need you to be a good girl and color while daddy has his meeting. Can you do that?”

“Lona read,” she responded.

I nodded. “Here Lona can write a book.”

I stood up and faced Ron and only a few other people. “Where is everybody? I said I wanted everyone here.”

“Yeah, well, we’re the only ones left in town. Everyone else has already taken off.”

“For what?” I asked.

“Drake it’s Christmas eve.”

“So? I’m here, you’re here, Sam is here.”

“Drake, I’d like to point out that I don’t celebrate Christmas, but if this were one of my holidays, I sure as hell would not be here. You brought your kid to what’s supposed to be a power meeting. Come on Drake,” Sam pointed out.

“What else am I supposed to do with her?” I asked.

“Hire a nanny, send her to daycare. Schedule this meeting online. There are options.” Sam pushed to his feet. “Look, no one is really working anyway. Call it, and let’s reschedule next week, or smarter yet after the first of the year when people are back from vacation.” He reached out and grabbed two boxes of doughnuts. “I’m taking them to my floor. There are a few of us who want to make sure we meet year end quotas; they deserve these more than any of us in this room. Be reasonable Drake.”

Rob was the only one who didn’t grab a box of doughnuts and leave. He slid a box of doughnuts over, but he didn’t get up and follow everyone out of the conference room.

“Well, Drake, that was a bust.”

I sat with a thud. The chair swiveled. Lona got up and reached out to me. I pulled her onto my lap.

“Push one of those boxes this way.”

Rob slid a box down the length of the table.

I caught it and opened it. Lona immediately reached out to grab a doughnut. I only stopped her from grabbing the chocolate glazed one, because I didn’t want to have to clean that particular mess up. Not that powdered sugar made less of a mess.

“So, what’s the plan, Drake? What was this going to be about?” Rob opened his own box and took a large bite.

“Frankly, I’m not certain anymore. All I know is that this morning I almost lost my assistant, and were going to start

offering childcare, and Lona is covering my Armani suit in sugar. I guess I just wanted a face-to-face check in.”

“We’ve been doing that over video conferencing ever since you moved. What’s changed?”

“I’m back in the city.”

“Why?” Rob asked. “You meticulously planned your exit. You didn’t move upstate on a whim. So why are you even back just the day before Christmas?”

He had a good point. I had spent months having the house in Millers Glen cleaned and prepared for occupation. I settled in so quickly and got comfortable on my return to my hometown. I stroked Lona’s hair and contemplated the rash decision I had made to come back here. Why?

So that I could avoid Kira’s big secret. Because acknowledging that I was Landon’s father would change everything. I was tired of massive upheavals in my life. I needed something reliable.

New York City was big and messy and reliable.

“I think I may have made a mistake, coming here,” I said.

“Wow, I didn’t think you made mistakes.” Rob half chuckled.

“We all make mistakes. What matters is if we own them and can correct them. So yeah, I make mistakes, but I typically don’t announce it, and fix my errors before anyone else notices. This time, too many people have seen what I’ve done. So, I need to make sure that everyone sees that I’m taking the steps to fix this.”

I stood, carrying Lona with me. I reached out and grabbed another box, there were still many left. “Who ordered so many doughnuts?”

“Look at how much coffee they ordered?” Rob pointed to a row of cardboard coffee dispensers.

“I guess you’ve got some cold brew in your future.”

“You aren’t taking one?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I’ve got a long drive, and not enough room in my car for a box of coffee.”

“But room for doughnuts?”

“There’s always room for doughnuts. I will issue an apology for wasting everyone’s time and reschedule with an agenda in a few days. In the meantime, let everyone know this was a bad idea on my call.

“Where are you going?”

“Home, back to Millers Glen. Back to fixing what I messed up. Have a good Christmas, Rob.” I patted him on the shoulder as I walked past.

“Merry Christmas boss, and you too Lona,” he said as we left.

I stopped at Andrea’s desk.

“Can you send out an office wide email about the doughnuts and coffee in Omega? Thank you. And Andrea, I really am sorry about earlier. I’m learning, boundaries are to be respected.”

She stared at me for a moment. “You’ve been gone a month, whatever happened to you in Millers Glen has been good for you.”

“That’s why I’m going back. There’s going to be some restructuring around here. Let’s make sure you get a proper office, and not this.” I circled my finger around in the semi-public space where her desk was located.

“Sounds like you don’t plan on coming back to the office full-time?”

I nodded. “Moving my office permanently this time. I’ll be back from time to time, so I’ll need a space, but I don’t need you to announce visitors, or keep HR from barging in on me like you have in the past. We’ll work out the details. Oh, and tell HR I’m giving you a raise, make it a good one.”

“I’m telling them you’re giving me a five-percent increase,” she chuckled.



“Sounds good to me. Have a good Christmas, Lona and I need to get going.” I walked out of the office, and this time I knew it was for good. I had a strong sense that I wouldn’t be back anytime soon.



## KIRA

Picking up the kneeling scooter changed Aunt Angie's life completely within hours. Of course, as soon as Landon saw it, he thought it was some kind of push bike, and he insisted on riding it around the house.

"This house isn't big enough, Landon," I tried to explain.

He pouted and blinked his adorable big eyes up at me. I wasn't going to cave. Not this time.

"It's for Aunt Angie because she can't walk. You understand?"

He nodded that he did understand.

"I'll let you scoot around." I heard Aunt Angie tell him after I had left.

As long as he didn't crash into anything, and he made sure it was where Aunt Angie could get to it when she needed it, I wouldn't ruin their little secret.

It was a nice mood lifter in the house, to have them playing and having a good time with the scooter. I was afraid that my mood was ruining Christmas for everyone. To overbalance my sour mood, I went to the extreme of becoming a Christmas elf for the day on Christmas Eve.

When I woke up that morning, I put on a flippy red skirt, green tights and a pair of fuzzy, white shearling lined slippers—the closest thing I had to what a North Pole Christmas elf might wear. I pulled on a festive Christmas sweater with reindeer and snowflakes knit into the pattern. I braided my hair into two long pigtails and pinned an old Santa hat on.

I was working the fake-it-till-you-make-it angle hard. Christmas was always work, but the look of joy and wonder on my little boy's face always made it worth it. Okay, I messed up a potentially really great thing with Drake. That didn't mean that I was allowed to ruin Landon's Christmas.

"You look silly, Mommy," Landon announced when he saw me.

"I'm one of Santa's elves for the day. It's my work uniform. I don't think I look silly. You know. You could dress up like an elf, and then we would both be silly. Could be fun?" I suggested.

Landon shook his head fiercely and insisted on wearing a dinosaur sweatshirt over a Spiderman t-shirt.

Aunt Angie had already gotten herself downstairs early in the morning. I knew she scooted up and down on her backside. She thought it was undignified for a woman of her age to be bouncing down the stairs on her butt, so she insisted on doing it when no one could observe her.

She was in the kitchen moving her scooter around the table and pulling items out of cupboards when Landon and I arrived to make breakfast.

"What are you doing?" I asked. I stepped into the kitchen and took the mixing bowl she was carrying out of her hands and placed it on the table before she dropped something.

Landon climbed into his chair and stayed out of the way. There was barely any room for all of us there with her scooter.

"I'm making breakfast. I thought I'd make French toast and scrambled eggs," she said.

"If you want scrambled eggs and French toast I'll make that for you. You're supposed to be resting."

"I'm supposed to be taking it easy. I can fix breakfast. Why are you dressed like a garden Gnome?"

There was no arguing with her when she was like this.

"I'm dressed like an elf because today I am doing all the baking for tomorrow. I also want to get most of tomorrow's

dinner taken care of, so all I have to worry about is the roast.”

She brushed me off with a shrug. “Fine, you want to help, get out the eggs and milk.”

I shooed Landon off to watch TV. “I’ll call you when breakfast is ready.”

“You know if we make a big batch of French toast this morning, we can reheat it for tomorrow,” I said.

“Do we have enough bread?”

I laughed, do we have enough bread, absolutely. As soon as I got to a grocery store after being snowed in and running out of bread, I over bought some the first opportunity I had.

“Yeah, we have plenty. We could also, instead of frying the bread, do a French bread pudding in the slow cooker.”

“Why don’t you get that all set up, since I know you like to prepare meals ahead of time, while I take care of this morning’s French toast,” Aunt Angie suggested.

I wrapped my favorite cookie baking apron over my elf gear and got busy.

It was a struggle to dance around the scooter as Aunt Angie moved awkwardly back and forth. We managed to successfully make breakfast. I called Landon back in, and the three of us enjoyed warm fluffy eggs, and sweet cinnamon French toast.

In typical little boy fashion, Landon mowed through his food so he could go back to playing with his Legos. I sat and savored every bite. It may have been a little too close in the kitchen for us to work together, but I had Aunt Angie home. She might have a broken ankle but I’m sure time would fix it.

But I didn’t know if time would fix what was broken inside me.

“Why don’t you go back into the TV room and rest. I’m sure Landon is itching to take your scooter for a little ride up and down the hall.” I stood and started collecting plates and adding them to the pile of dishes I had to take care of before I started my day of baking.

“How about you give me those apples to peel while you wash up and tell me what’s really going on?” she suggested.

“What do you mean? I’m going to bake today, and cook,” I said.

“I know. But you’ve been hiding in this kitchen for days. And you dress up when you want to make a good impression or change your mood. This get up”— she gestured at my elf fashion— “makes me think you are trying too hard. What happened with Drake?”

“What makes you think it’s Drake?” I turned my back and turned the water on. I wasn’t ready to confess everything yet and I didn’t need her to see the emotions all over my face.

“I know you Kira, and I know people. He was right there by your side the first time he came over, and then he never left your side. That young man—”

I scoffed. “Heh, young.”

“He’s younger than I am, and he’s still a good age to be a match for you. But he had his decision about you on his face. It was the way he looked at you. He drove you up to the hospital, he stayed here and dug you out after the storm. I’m not blind.” She kept talking.

I rolled up my sleeves and pulled the rubber gloves for dishwashing out from under the sink. I squirted blue dish soap over everything and began scrubbing and bubbles over all of the dishes.

“When I get a new job, we should think about getting a dishwasher installed,” I said, trying to deflect the conversation.

“I have a dishwasher. You are doing a fine job. And Landon is learning. Trust me when he’s an adult, some woman will appreciate that he knows how to clean up.”

“Are you saying we are training my son to be good husband material?” I tried to chuckle.

“You are raising him to be a respectful and respectable young man. Knowing his way around in a kitchen is part of that. He’s

old enough to start learning how to make sandwiches for lunch. I think I'll start working on that with him."

I let out a silent sigh. Good, topic of discussion redirected. No more talk about Drake.

"Why didn't you tell me Drake was the boy's father?"

I dropped the bowl I was washing and turned around.

"What? No? Where did you get that idea from?" I tried not to scream at her. How was she saying these things out loud? No one knew, no one. Except, well that woman at the relief center, she figured it out. And Drake, he had too.

"Why are you hiding it, Kira? I mean I guess I understand maybe back when you first got pregnant, but Drake came back. There is clearly love between you. Why not admit to it?"

"There is no love between Drake and me. He left me. He left me twice. I don't know where he's gone. Well, that's not true, he's in the city. But how am I supposed to find one man in New York City? He doesn't want me, so he's not Landon's father." I crossed my arms.

"And if he stayed? Would he be the boy's father then? He has to know."

I nodded. "He figured it out. That's why he left. He doesn't want to be Landon's father, so I never mentioned it, and I will never mention it."

"He figured it out?" Aunt Angie set down the apple she was peeling. "Do you think maybe he might have stayed if you had said something?"

I shrugged. "I'll never know now, will I?"

"Shame. Landon and Lona were so cute together. He naturally stepped into the big brother role without even being aware. It's like his heart knew." She started peeling again.

"I don't want him to know, okay. He doesn't need to know how close he got to getting a father and a sister for Christmas. It's hard enough to have lost a friend the way he lost Lona, but he doesn't need to know the rest."

“He will someday,” she said.

“I know, but he’s five and it’s Christmas, and that story has heartbreak all over it. So, let’s wait.”

“Besides,” she started. “He could still get a father and a sister. I’m sure Drake will realize he’s being foolish and come back.”

“I seriously doubt that. I mean I thought Drake was going to come back when I found out he was helping Cassandra pay for my college. I thought he liked me enough for that. But instead, he forgot all about me and got married, and a kid. He didn’t come back to Millers Glen for me. I was just some kind of bonus like when they used to put toys in cereal boxes.”

“You are much more than a toy in a box of cereal. Don’t give up hope, Kira. I think Drake will figure it out, and when he comes back, it will be for you.”

“Yeah, well. What I hope for right now, is that I can get these dishes finished so I can start my pie crusts.” I didn’t tell her I had given up hope of having some kind of happy ever after with Drake when I saw how empty his house was and realized he had left.





## DRAKE

What the hell had I been thinking of calling an all hands-on deck meeting for Christmas Eve? I had stopped thinking functionally the moment I pulled away from Kira's house. No, my logical thinking had stopped much before that. If I had been thinking clearly, I would have followed her inside and listened to her explanation. She had to have her reasons for not telling me about Landon. I should have listened and not reacted like I was a toddler with hurt feelings. I was an adult, I needed to behave like one.

"We need to go home, Lona," I said.

She nodded. I don't know if she understood exactly what I meant. But she would soon enough. With Lona in one arm, and boxes of doughnuts in the other I left my New York office. I hadn't expected to have returned to it so soon. This time I told myself I wouldn't be back unless I had a legitimate business need that couldn't be handled through emails or video calls.

As I climbed out of the back of the taxi, I looked up at the building. I had lived here for years, and suddenly it seemed so foreign.

"Mr. Schriver, how can I help you?" the building concierge asked.

I approached his desk, instead of sweeping past and to the elevator bank with barely a nod of recognition. "It looks like I will be moving back upstate. I'm not staying as I had thought.

I'll need you to make arrangements to close down the apartment for another prolonged leave of absence," I told him.

"Very well, is there anything else I may be of service with?"

"Yes, have my car brought around. I'll need a doorman to assist with bags." I looked at my watch. It was already ten thirty. "Let's say one thirty, shall we?"

"Very good, sir."

"Oh, and here. Share them with the guys." I handed him one of the boxes of doughnuts.

"Thank you, sir."

I was still living out of my suitcase, and it wouldn't take much time to gather Lona's belongings. I removed the lights from the tree we had, and dragged the tree next to the front door so the cleaning service would take care of it. I did other small things to wrap up our brief moment of living back in the city.

At one thirty exactly a doorman arrived to help with our bags. My car was sitting at the curb. I thanked the man and slipped him an envelope with his Christmas bonus. After handing the concierge the Christmas bonus tips for the other doormen, and himself, it was time to leave.

Getting out of the city with the holiday traffic felt like it took even longer than it did on a typically busy day. We stopped for an early dinner in Albany before continuing the drive. As long as the weather stayed nice, and we didn't run into any traffic—I don't think we would, having left all the traffic behind close to the city, and a brief encounter with Albany rush hour traffic on a holiday—we would get to Millers Glen before everyone had got to bed.

A second long car ride so soon after we had driven back to the city was hard on Lona. She was strapped in and fussy. At some point after dinner, she fell asleep. I still had a long way to go, but at least the rest of the ride would be easy on her.

When we arrived back in Millers Glen, I took the long way to my house, driving through the center of town. I didn't think it was possible, but I had missed the simplicity of a small town

decked out for the holiday. Everything was quiet since almost everyone was in their own home.

As I drove, I noticed how many houses were lit up. Practically everyone had a row of string lights whether in a front window or lining their front door. Of course, some homes had every edge highlighted with lights. And more than half had lawn decorations.

I was tempted to cruise past Kira's house to see if they had put any decorative lights up. She had been so pleased with the old-fashioned rustic decoration of the tree; I almost didn't think she would have lights.

I left the car running and walked up to the front of my house, to see what was going on.

"Hey, can I help you? This is my property."

The light bounced around a bit before hitting me in the face, and then it was on the face of the man holding it. It was Ted. "What are you doing back here Mr. Schriver?"

I was as surprised to see him sweeping snow off the porch as he probably was to see me.

"I live here," I said.

"But I thought..."

"Yeah, I did too." I shrugged. "I changed my mind, and we came back to have a proper Christmas."

"Well, I'll get out of your way then. Lee Ann kicked me out of the house so she could get some last-minute decorating taken care of. So, I thought I'd come check on the place. I guess you won't need me to board up the windows next week," he said.

I shook my head. "No, we won't need that now."

I saw the tree, still wrapped up in its netting from the previous week when Kira, the kids, and I had gone out right before the storm. It felt like a family. Hopefully this Christmas will bring that back.

I recalled how dark and cold the house had been the first night before Lona and I had imposed ourselves on Kira's hospitality.

"You haven't been running the heat, have you?" I asked.

"No, the inside of the house is pretty much shut down. Had the electricity last week and I'm just waiting for the rest of the utilities to cut service at the end of the month before I finish. I did get that generator in place, but I haven't given it a test run. It didn't seem like that was something that needed to happen since you left and told me to close it up."

I nodded, following the conversation. It made perfect sense. Of course, the house would have utility services cut off, and appliances shut off. If no one was living in the house, none of those things would be needed.

I huffed half of a chuckle. I came back here to give Lona a big Christmas surprise, and we don't have a place to stay. Just brilliant.

"It looks like I need to make some arrangements," I started. "Can I get you to sit in the car and keep an eye on Lona. She's asleep. I don't expect her to wake up. Also, can I borrow your flashlight?"

He handed me the flashlight, and I watched to make sure he got in the car.

The house was cold and dark. I made my way to my office and found what I needed. Collecting the items, I navigated the dark and returned to the front.

Lona was still asleep.

"Do you think Lee Ann would let you back in the house, if I asked you to watch Lona for an hour or two? I've got a limited amount of time, and a lot to do to make Christmas special for her."

Ted nodded and pulled out his phone. "Yes, it's me. Look, wait Lee Ann. Mr. Schriver is back and needs us to watch the kid for a bit."

There was a long pause. I could hear the chatter sound of someone on the other end of the call, but I couldn't make out

the words.

“I’ll do the watching, and we will stay out of your way,” Ted continued.

“Tell her, I will make it up to you,” I said.

“Yes, you heard him. Okay I will. See you in a bit.” He ended the call and looked over. “She said to bring Lona on over.”

I threw the items I grabbed from the office into the car and followed Ted over to his house.

“Lona, my sweet girl, I need you to wake up just a little bit.” I cooed as I unbuckled her from the car seat.

“You are going to stay with Ted and Lee Ann for just a little bit, and I’ll come back for you soon. You remember Lee Ann?”

Lona blinked sleep laden eyes up and me, and snuggled against my shoulder and I carried her inside. Their house smelled like Christmas should. Baking cookies mixed with apples and cinnamon. Just like Kira’s house smelled.

Lee Ann greeted us at the door. “I’ll take her. You go take care of your business. And we’ll be right here.”

The grin on her face, and the way her eyes sparkled made me think that Lee Ann knew exactly what I was up to.

“Can I give her some C O O K I E S, when they’re done?” She asked, spelling out the word so Lona wouldn’t get too excited.

I nodded, kissed Lona on the forehead, and left. I drove immediately to the street Kira lived on. Multicolored lights framed the picture window. She had put decorative lights up.

I stopped the car in front of her house, parking on the street. I didn’t pull into the driveway, because I didn’t want to startle everyone inside. I sat in the car and prepared myself. This worked in the movies, hopefully my attempt at a grand gesture would work for me.

Taking my stack of cardboard, I left the warmth of my car and made my way up her drive to the front of the house. My feet crunched on the snow that was still on the ground from the

week before. I climbed the three concrete steps, rang the doorbell, and quickly retreated, waiting. Hoping it would be Kira to open the door.

My heart pounded in my throat. And when an adorable little elf with long pig tailed braids, and a sweater that clung to all of her curves opened the door, I think it stopped beating completely.





## KIRA

“I’ve got it!” Landon called out the second the doorbell rang.

I stepped out of the kitchen before Landon had figured out how to move the bowl of popcorn from his lap and climb out from under the blanket, he was twisted up in.

“Watch your movie. I’ve got it. Besides, you’re not allowed to answer the door when it’s dark out,” I told him.

“Who could be ringing our doorbell at this time of night and on Christmas Eve?” Aunt Angie asked.

“I’ll know in a second. Maybe it’s Christmas carollers.”

It was not a group of people going door to door singing Christmas music. It was Drake. And he was standing there like some hero from a rom com holding up a piece of cardboard.

“It’s blank,” I pointed out.

“I couldn’t decide what I needed to start with, so I figured this way you can choose what you want it to say.” He licked his lips and looked up into the night sky before returning his gaze to me.

Wow. That was a lot of pressure. What did I want Drake to show up on my doorstep and say to me?

I thought about it for a moment. The cold started to make itself known. I rubbed my arms and danced in place a little.

“Who is it, Kira?” Aunt Angie called out.

I panicked and was about to yell out ‘no one.’ But that wasn’t true. It was Drake, and he was definitely someone. Him being here indicated that he wanted to be my someone. At least that’s what I decided all of this meant.

“I think the board should start with...” I hesitated and bit my lip.

“I’m sorry. I should have listened to you when you were ready to talk,” he said.

“That’s a very good first message.”

“Drake!” Landon yelled from just behind me.

I managed to step in front of him before he launched himself out the door.

“Is Lona here?”

Drake shook his head. “She’s with Lee Ann and Ted for now. I’ll go get her in a bit. But first I need to apologize to your mother,” he said to Landon.

“Go inside, and watch your movie,” I firmly told my son. Our son.

My insides twisted as I realized this was the conversation that would end with Drake knowing he had a son.

“You’ll see Lona later, okay?” I said to Landon.

He didn’t need to be in the middle of this right now, even if this was one hundred percent about him. His head jutted forward, and his back curved into a heavy slouch as he shuffled away. I closed the door behind me so he couldn’t sneak up on me again.

I shivered in the cold, but I was determined to see this through.

“What does your next board say?”

Drake chuckled and looked at the single piece of cardboard in his hands. He flipped it around, so we could both pretend there was something written there.

“You tell me, after all it’s blank,” he said.

“I’m—”

The door behind me opened.

I turned to chastise Landon for interrupting again. Only, it was Aunt Angie, and she looked like she was trying not to smile, she was mostly failing.

“It’s too cold out here to be having this conversation. You need to invite Drake inside and work this out over a warm drink,” she said looking directly at me. She shifted her gaze and peered through the door to look out past me. “It took you long enough. Come on inside and get warm.”

She pulled the door open with her as she rolled her scooter back.

Stepping aside, I tipped my head to the side, indicating Drake should come inside.

“Angie, you are looking well. I like your scooter,” Drake said as he stepped inside.

I closed the door as he took his coat off.

“It’s been a real help for getting around. It was Kira’s bright idea,” Aunt Angie said.

“She’s a smart woman,” Drake replied.

Landon danced around the edge of the room, bouncing from foot to foot. He really was eager to see Lona.

“Landon, come finish the movie with me. Your mom has to talk grown up stuff with Drake. We need to leave them alone,” Aunt Angie said as she tried to herd him back into the TV room.

“Come on.” I indicated that Drake should follow me, and I walked down the hall to the kitchen.

A pile of dishes sat in the sink. I had pies, and a green bean casserole, along with candied yams all cooling on the kitchen table.

“It looks like you are getting ready for your big Christmas dinner.” Drake said.

“Yeah, I don’t want to spend all day tomorrow cooking. I have a turkey that will take over most of the day. Breakfast is all

ready to go. I'll put it in the slow cooker on a timer. So in the morning it will smell like cinnamon."

"It sounds like you have tomorrow well in hand."

I shook my head. "Not really." I bit my lip. "I tend to organize and over prepare when I feel like I'm not in control of anything. We have apple cider; would you like some warm cider?" I changed the topic as fast as I could.

"I was hoping you would offer me some hot chocolate," he smirked.

"Oh sure. I thought you might like something else, something different."

Neither of us moved. We stood there awkwardly next to the table just inside the door, exchanging pleasantries. Seconds passed, maybe minutes. Neither of us said anything. We kept making eye contact and glancing away. There was so much to say, I didn't know where to start.

"I like your hot chocolate," he said.

I took a deep breath. "Right, hot chocolate."

I turned and started to pull the things I needed out of the cabinet. I reached up and Drake's warmth was at my back. I froze. His scent wrapped around me moments before his arms did. He turned me to face him, warm hands cupped my face.

"I never should have left you," his words were puffs of air against my skin seconds before he kissed me.

My arms tangled around his neck as I pressed into him. His lips were warm and the kiss gentle, like he was reminding himself what kissing me was like. He ended the kiss and his thumb brushed away the tears that had spilled from my eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I didn't know what to say," I started. It was hard to speak through the crying, but I kept going. "I should have said something earlier. I didn't realize..."

Drake took my hands and guided me into a chair. He pulled a second chair close so he could sit and hold my hands.

“I figured it out,” he said. “Landon looks exactly like me. It wasn’t hard to figure out he’s, my son.”

I nodded. “When I got pregnant, I had no idea how to tell you. And I decided to just show up at your house and blurt it all out. But you were gone. And I didn’t know where you were.”

“You could have asked around.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, probably. But I didn’t think about that. And I wasn’t comfortable asking Cassandra. She could be kind of judgmental about that kind of thing. I mean she was when I wouldn’t tell her who the father was. But she was friends with your mother, and I didn’t want to make problems for you. I don’t know if you remember, but you didn’t exactly seem interested in me. And I pretty much figured you didn’t want everyone to know that you had slept with me. I’m not exactly the type someone from a family like you—”

His mouth was on mine, stopping me from talking. “Don’t go there Kira. I’m sorry you went through all of that alone. I was very interested in you. You seemed so young, almost too young. And you are very right about how accepting my family would have been over a girl like you. It’s why I kept pushing you to go to college. I put you in a bad place.” He let out a long breath. “So, why didn’t you tell people I’m the father? Does Angie know?”

I shook my head. “She only does now because she figured it out. You’re right Landon does look exactly like you. And he and Lona are clearly brother and sister. I didn’t tell anyone because I couldn’t face the pity. ‘Oh, poor you, used and left but the wealthy family.’ Or worse, thinking I had tricked you and gotten pregnant for some kind of a pay-out. I didn’t tell anyone because I didn’t want Landon to have to shoulder any of that. Of course, now that you’re back again— you are back, aren’t you? Please tell me you’re staying.”

“I’m staying. Lona and I are staying. Our family is here. You and Landon are here. I shouldn’t have left this time. I should never have left.” He reached out and traced his knuckles down the side of my face.

I studied his handsome face. He looked tired, as if the past few days had been as hard on him as they had been on me. I loved being able to gaze at him like this, openly, unafraid. I didn't have to hide what he might see in my eyes.

"I love you, Kira. I love that I have a family with you and Landon."

I launched the few inches that separated us, claiming Drake's lips in a fierce kiss.

"I have an important question," Drake started.

I stopped breathing. There was no way he was going to ask me to marry him right now. Was he? I tried to swallow, but my throat was dry. The silence between us seemed to last forever.



## DRAKE

“Lona and I don’t have a place to stay. Can we spend Christmas with you?” I asked.

Kira placed her hand on her chest and took a deep breath and let out a nervous giggle. “Of course, you can. That would be perfect. So much better than waiting for you to come over in the morning.”

She pushed to her feet and opened the refrigerator and pulled out a ziplock bag. She scrunched the bag around in her hands before opening it and setting it so it wouldn’t spill. I watched as she continued to move around, picking up the rest of a loaf of bread, opening the refrigerator again.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’ll need to add some more bread for breakfast. It’s a bread pudding.” She started to tear the bread into chunks. “You should probably go get Lona. She and Landon are going to take hours to settle down tonight.”

She put the bread down and stared at me. “I don’t have a guest room. We can put Lona in with Landon, but—”

“Why can’t I share with you?”

“Well...” she started.

“Kira, we already have a child together. It will be okay. Your aunt will not judge you, or us.”

She chuckled. “You’re right. I don’t have to pretend about us anymore, do I?”



I shook my head. “No, we’re together from now on. The world can know it, or the world can ignore us. But it’s not a secret, never again.”

She reached her hand out to me. I stood up and crossed the room to her. I took her hand, and then I wrapped her into my embrace.

“I love you. You are the best Christmas present I could wish for.” I claimed her lips. I kept the kiss short, even though I wanted to linger over the taste of her for hours. I had to get my daughter so our family could be together.

“Where are you going?” Landon asked, following me as I walked out of the kitchen.

“I have to go get Lona,” I said.

Kira wrapped her arms across his shoulders. “Drake and Lona are staying with us for Christmas. It will be just like during the storm, but better.”

I turned to look at them before I stepped outside. My heart filled my chest. My woman, my son. My love.

The drive was short.

“You weren’t gone long at all,” Lee Ann said as she greeted me.

“Things went well. Thank you for watching Lona.”

“Daddy!” Lona yelled as she ran from the back of the house.

I swung her up into my arms. “Are you ready to see Landon?”

“Landon?” She swirled her head around looking for him.

“He’s not here, he’s at his house, sweetie. You daddy is going to take you over there,” Lee Ann said as she helped Lona get bundled back up.

We exchanged Merry Christmas wishes before Lona and I were able to leave. I had a momentary twinge of being rude, having left so fast, but I needed to get back. I wouldn’t feel content or believe this was my new reality until I had Kira back in my arms.

The entire drive back, Lona chanted Landon, over and over again. What had I been thinking, taking her away from her brother, her favorite person? I realized it didn't matter if I told her she would see him soon, she just kept up her happy singsong of his name.

I didn't bother knocking when we returned to Kira's house. Lona ran inside and I heard the happy squeals of laughter as she and Landon were reunited. I felt their joy as my family was back together.

"This is a special Christmas," Angie said. "I have a houseful of laughing children for the first time in a long time. You have a handful with these two. They are going to take hours to settle. I think I will head upstairs now while everyone is distracted. I'll see you in the morning." She struggled as she got up and placed her knee on the scooter.

"Do you need any help getting upstairs?" I asked.

"I need you to stay in here, and let me handle this on my own," she said.

Kira placed her hand on my arm. "She's got a system. Good night, Aunt Angie."

"Good night, dear. And I'm glad you came back Drake. We can have a nice big happy family now. Good night."

She rolled to the stairs. Kira pulled me away before I could watch how Angie planned on getting upstairs.

"She doesn't like to be watched. She'll be fine," she said.

I retreated back into the TV room. Landon and Lona were on the floor, and he was showing her something he had built with his Legos.

Kira dragged me back to sit next to her on the couch. She leaned her head against my shoulder. "I still have the presents you had me buy. So, Lona has stuff to open in the morning." She spoke in a low tone so the kids couldn't hear.

"Thank you," I whispered into her hair. "I only have a few things. They are in the back of the car. I'm not very good at

this Christmas thing. It's really the first year I've done anything for her."

"Hey." Kira sat up and cupped my face so that our gazes met. "You were dealing with a lot; you did the best you could. That counts."

"I could say the same for you," I told her.

She nodded. "So, we figure out how to get it right together?"

I kissed her. Together. That's what we need to be from now on.

After a while the playing grew quieter. The kids were finally getting tired.

"Okay everyone. It's time for bed. We want Santa to have plenty of time to visit," Kira announced.

I started to help her get the kids upstairs.

"I've got them. Why don't you get everything ready for Santa? You know, put out the cookies and milk." She mouthed, 'Get stuff out of the car.' over the tops of the kids' heads.

I nodded in understanding. I went into the kitchen to get a plate of cookies and a glass of milk ready. I poured milk into a clean glass, and then drank half of it. I found multiple storage tubs full of cookies. I ate at least one before I put three onto a plate.

Making sure everyone was upstairs before I put the milk and cookies on the low table in the TV room next to the tree, I hurried outside to grab our bags, and the presents for Lona. I left the bags near the stairs, stashed the presents under the tree, including the last minute one I prepared for Kira.

It was some time before she returned downstairs with her arms full of presents.

"Oh good, you found the cookies." She took a single bite out of one and then broke another in half before eating it. "Let me get breakfast ready, and then we need to go to bed. The kids will be up very early."

I was waiting to follow her upstairs when she was done in the kitchen. Neither of us said anything as we climbed the stairs. I

closed the door to her bedroom and flicked the lock before dragging her against me.

In silence, I started to remove her clothes as I kissed her. Her mouth was greedy against mine. I plunged my tongue between her lips to dance with hers. I had been such an idiot, leaving her behind. Accusing her of indiscretions because she hadn't known how to tell me a secret, she had held close to her heart for years.

She was my redemption, my second chance.

With our eyes locked, she pulled me back to her bed. She sat and began unfastening my pants. Soon our clothes were gone, and it was her skin against mine. Her softness and warmth were everything I needed.

I needed to be surrounded by her and claim her all at once. She was mine, but I wanted her to be very aware that I was hers. She tasted sweet as I kissed and licked across her skin. Her breasts were like candy in my mouth. I sucked her nipple into my mouth and twirled my tongue over her.

Kira's fingernails sank into the skin of my shoulders like needles. Pin pricks of pain that was more pleasurable than I could imagine.

She tried to stop the soft mewls that escaped her lips as I touched, and consumed, and played her body like a fine instrument. She clutched tighter when I slipped two fingers between the slick folds of her pussy. I circled her clit. Her hips bucked up against my hand. She was hot and slick. She felt like heaven in my hands.

"Please," she whispered. "I need you, Drake. Ah."

Her hips thrust and rocked against my hand. I sank my fingers into her depths. Her inner walls sucked at me. Damn, she was going to feel amazing against my cock, but I wanted this to last.

She grabbed a fist full of my hair and pulled until I lifted my head away from her breasts. Her lips were swollen from my kisses, and her eyes glazed over with the same need I felt. I

shifted and pressed my lips to hers, and then I pressed my hips to hers.

She wrapped her legs around me. My cock found her entrance, and slowly I eased into her. We both let out deep sighs of satisfaction. I held tight to her for a glorious moment before I couldn't contain myself. I eased back and began sliding into her, thrust after thrust. With each motion my body claimed her as mine.

She clenched my cock as her orgasm began to wind up. Her entire body tensed and twitched, and spasmed around me. Her hands fluttered over my shoulders as she tried to grab a hold but then didn't.

I enjoyed watching her face as pleasure took control. I almost laughed out loud when she grabbed a handful of bedsheets and bit into it.

I was overwhelmed with my own pleasure as my body clenched. I managed to thrust hard against her a few more times.

"You are mine," I practically growled as my own orgasm ripped through me. My reality turned inside out. I saw stars, and then my vision cleared, and Kira was smiling up at me.

"Merry Christmas," she said with a light laugh.

"You are the best present I could have ever asked for." I slid to the side and pulled her against my chest.

"You said that before," she teased.

"Well, it's true, and I love you," I said.

"I wished for a Christmas miracle, and I got you. I love you, Drake."

Santa couldn't have given me anything more perfect than having Kira in my arms.



# EPILOGUE

## KIRA

“**M**ommy, wake up, it’s Christmas!” Landon crashed into my bedroom and jumped on the bed. Lona was right behind him. Only she wasn’t able to climb up as fast as Landon had.

“Daddy, Christmas!”

Drake sat up and lifted Lona onto the bed with us.

At some point in the middle of the night, I made Drake put on pajamas, and unlocked the door. I know I was glad we had.

“Sh, no yelling. You’ll wake up Aunt Angie.”

I heard her bedroom door open. “Too late, I’m already up. Why don’t you head downstairs. I’ll follow along behind.”

“You heard Aunt Angie. We need to head downstairs.”

Landon started to dash out the door.

“Oh no you don’t,” I called out after him. “Slippers and robe. It’s cold. Help Lona with a pair of your old slippers, I know you have some in the back of your closet.”

He paused, and then ran back to his room. Lona chased after him.

I patted Drake on his chest. “You too, layer up, it will be cold down there.”

He kissed me. “Merry Christmas. Is this what it’s like? Christmas morning with kids?”



I nodded. "It's wonderful." I shoved my feet into my fuzzy slippers and pulled a sweatshirt over my pajamas before putting my robe over it all.

The kids were already heading down the stairs by the time I made it out into the hall. "No running on the stairs."

The timer on the crockpot had clearly done its job. Downstairs smelled like cinnamon rolls baking as the bread pudding cooked.

"I'm going to start a fire," Drake announced.

"Santa was here!" Landon called out excitedly. "Look, he ate the cookies!"

Lona squealed, "Cookies!"

Everything was over the top excitement for him. Lona followed his lead; she seemed uncertain what she should be doing. He ran to the front window before running back to the TV room. She followed. They were dynamo of energy, and I was barely functional, but faking it so that no one else knew I really wanted to climb back into bed.

"I don't see any footprints outside," he declared.

"You aren't going to see any footprints outside. The reindeer landed on the roof, remember?" Drake said.

"I forgot. That's right." Landon was so serious about finding other evidence of Santa. It was as if the half-eaten cookie and the pile of presents wasn't enough.

I loved how Christmas magic was still so strong within him. Hopefully we could nurture that for a few more years before someone ruined it for him. He would find it again when he grew up and had kids. But until then, it was my job to make this morning one of wonder and joy. I found Christmas magic again when I had him and it was my turn to carry on the traditions.

"You need to wait for Aunt Angie to come downstairs before you can open anything. Landon, why don't you put the scooter next to the stairs for her when she comes down." I needed to redirect his energy from diving in and ripping open all of the

presents. “Why don’t you pick out one or two presents for everyone to open as soon as she’s ready.”

Landon nodded eagerly. He got Lona to help him. It took some time because he could read his name, but the other names took some time. It made my heart happy to see everyone working to bring everything together, so we had a fun Christmas morning. I pushed into the kitchen and started a pot of coffee while I made enough for everyone hot chocolate.

“Who wants coffee and who wants chocolate?” I asked.

“I’ll have coffee with a splash of chocolate,” Aunt Angie said from the couch.

“Oh good you made it down,” I replied.

“Hurry up or these kids are going to expire from having to wait,” she said.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. When I returned, I had coffee for Aunt Angie and Drake, and hot chocolates for me and the kids. I put ice cubes in theirs, so they didn’t burn their lips while drinking before the hot liquid cooled down properly.

“Can we open now?” Landon asked. He was desperate to start opening his gifts.

“Sure, you can open your presents,” Drake said.

The sound of ripping paper filled the air as Landon and Lona tore into their first presents. Landon opened a puzzle first. Instead of setting the box to the side and starting on another present, he opened the box and began looking at all the pieces.

Lona put her present down, one of those small pony toys, and started looking at the puzzle pieces with Landon.

“What are they doing?” Drake asked me.

“Landon likes to really look at and play with his presents. He takes his time with Christmas morning,” I explained. I sat on the couch and wrapped a blanket around my feet.

Drake sat on the floor and helped the kids locate presents with their names on them when they were done examining the puzzle pieces and ready for another present.

He handed one to Lona. "Take this to Aunt Angie."

She delivered the present with as much enthusiasm as she had opening one of her own.

"Oh, it's small. Good things come in small packages," she said.

"That one is from me," I said. I wiggled a bit in my seat so I could watch her.

"It's a gift card," she announced as she opened a small tin that I had placed the gift in.

"It's more than a gift card. It's an open-ended pass, so you can go at any time. There's an alpaca farm, where you go and they teach you how to take the fur and spin yarn, and you make your own alpaca wool for knitting." I couldn't tell by the expression on her face if she liked it or not. "You're always saying how soft you think the good alpaca yarn feels. I thought you might have fun."

Aunt Angie started to say something not positive. Her brow pinched together, and she pursed her lips before opening her mouth.

"Before you say anything, that's for two people so you can take one of your friends."

"You knew I was going to say something about going alone. This is a very nice present. Thank you, dear. But how could you afford it? This is too much."

"You're not supposed to ask how much a gift is. But so, you don't pester me over it, I used one of those group coupons, and I bought the passes over the summer when I was working at Nadine's. You'll have to cover the hotel, but the rest is paid for."

"Excuse me," Drake said as he got up and went into the kitchen.

Landon and Lona played with one of her new toys while Drake was gone. It was a great habit that Aunt Angie had taught Landon that extended Christmas morning for hours. I loved that he was now teaching it to Lona.

“Sorry, this is a bit last minute. My shopping and planning weren’t up to par this year. Merry Christmas, Angie.” Drake handed Aunt Angie an envelope with a present drawn on it.

“Another small package,” she sounded delighted. “Oh, thank you. That is very kind.”

“What is it?” I asked, leaning closer to see what she had.

She held up a pink sticky note with some scribbled words on it.

“Drake is covering the cost of the hotel and all meals for the alpaca farm trip,” she said.

“Drake! Thank you,” I said. “That’s so thoughtful.”

He shrugged. “I hope you don’t mind the last-minute nature of my gifts. I haven’t done Christmas for a few years. I’m used to my assistant making sure I look organized. I’ve been on my own this year.”

“I’m just glad you’re here with us. That’s more than a perfect gift for me,” I said. And I meant it.

“I agree, that’s a very good gift for us all, but I have something for you too.” He handed me a similar envelope.

I opened it and pulled out a small collection of sticky notes. I smiled; he had written his message on them one word at a time.

I.

Love.

You.

Will.

You.

Merry. Merry had a line through it and marry was scrawled next to it. He was being cute, playing with words.

Me?

I gasped and covered my mouth.

Drake sat watching me. His eyebrows lifted.

Aunt Angie watched me closely. I grinned. I had an idea. I got up and went into the kitchen and grabbed the pen and the sticky notes he had left out on the counter.

I returned to the TV room and my spot on the couch. I wrote one sticky note at a time.

Yes.

I.

Will.

I handed the notes to Drake.

He started laughing.

“Well, what do all of those notes say?” Aunt Angie asked.

Drake reached up and pulled me down onto his lap where he was on the floor. “We’re getting married. Kira just agreed to be my wife.”

He smiled into my eyes and gave me the most amazing kiss. It was soft and tender and felt like he poured all of his emotion and love into the kiss.

Lona climbed onto my lap and Landon joined the pile.

“Are you going to live with Drake, that’s what wife means, right?” Landon asked.

I grabbed Landon and kissed the top of his head. “Yes, that’s what it means. You’ll live with us too. It also means you get a father. Drake’s gonna be your daddy.” I didn’t think I needed to tell him that Drake was his biological father right then. I could tell him later. With Drake’s help we would find out the best time to let Landon know.

“And Lona’s my sister?” Landon looked shocked.

“I guess you got to become a big brother for Christmas. How about that?” I couldn’t stop laughing. I was so happy.

Landon practically crushed Lona in a bear hug. “I’m your big brother!”

Lona tried to wiggle out of his grip.

“Careful with your sister,” Drake said as he eased Landon back.

“Do I call you Daddy now?” Landon asked.

“Whatever you want to call me, okay?” Drake said.

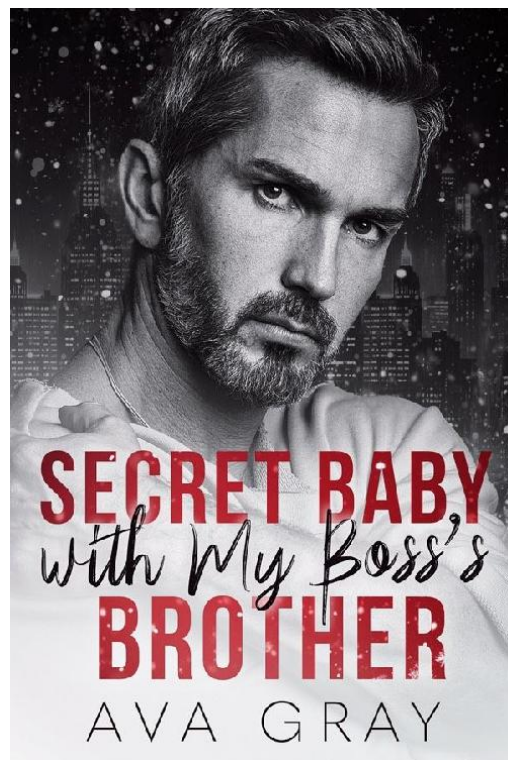
“Congratulations. I couldn’t be happier for you both,” Aunt Angie said.

“Same,” Drake said. “I’ve never been as happy as this moment, right now.”

“I love you.” I threw my arms around him and kissed him again.



## EXCERPT: SECRET BABY WITH MY BOSS'S BROTHER



**3** things you shouldn't do when you're a billionaire's nanny:

- 1. Sleep with his brother**
- 2. Get pregnant**
- 3. Keep it a secret for 5 years...**

I learned actions have consequences the hard way. All it took was one summer fling with my boss's brother, and I ended up pregnant and devastated after hearing a secret that changed everything.



Five years later, Kincaid reappears, pretending nothing's wrong.

And unfortunately for me, the gorgeous older man is even more irresistible than he was years ago... He also has no idea there's a little girl called Kim waiting for me at home.

A little girl that looks just like him.

But Kincaid never pursued me. Nothing will change that – not even him wining and dining me to win back my affection. I will not be fooled twice.

Except maybe I've got it all wrong...

Maybe my stubbornness drove me away when all Kincaid wanted was for me to be back in his arms. Is it too late to save the family we could have had?

***Secret Baby with the Boss's Brother* is a full-length, standalone age gap billionaire romance. One-click now for your spicy dose of secret baby second chance love!**

**Tonya**

"We're almost there!" Mr. Thomas yelled from the front seat.

Instinctively I reached forward and began rocking the two car seats in the row in front of me. His loud booming voice had startled Reece. She flinched and began fussing. Tyler slept through the disturbance.

Teejay Thomas reached out and smacked her husband in the arm. She had her aggravated face on. Mr. Thomas— never Mr. T, and I was never to address him by his first name, hell I wasn't really allowed to talk to him— cracked up, he smiled, giggled maniacally and responded to her vitriol with humor and delight.

Either he was clueless, or he didn't care.

I should have paid more attention to that movie. That one where that actress thinks becoming a nanny would be a good idea after she graduated college and really wasn't certain what she wanted to do next. Instead I spent most of the time during that movie drooling over the hunky neighbor who grew up and turned into some kind of superhero, the actor that is. I didn't

absorb the real message that being rich really didn't mean being happy, and that being a nanny would be signing away my right to choose how I dressed and what I ate.

Instead, I listened to friends and family members who waxed poetic about being au pairs for some rich families. One friend took a gap year and ended up traveling across Europe. It may have been a working trip, but not only was it free, she also got paid.

My aunt worked as a nanny for the same family for years. She was paid to take the children on adventurous vacations the parents were 'too busy' to take. She also walked away from that job with a car. A really good one, the one they had purchased specifically for her to drive their children around in. When she parted ways with the family, the car was 'too old' to be of any value to them, so they let her keep it.

With dreams of some kind of obscenely rich adjacent adventures, I applied with an agency. Instead, I ended up with Teejay and Ryan Thomas and was now stuck in the back of their SUV between tote bags full of beach toys, and cases of water bottles and juice boxes.

There had been a moment that I harbored expectations of a trip to Europe. I had overheard the couple discussing a trip to Switzerland. Apparently Mr. T had some job prospects or connections there. I was really glad I hadn't held my breath.

A summer on the beach wasn't exactly something to turn my nose up at. But it meant a lot of time wearing clothes that Teejay Thomas fully didn't approve of on me. She lived in tank tops and body-con styles and a lot of shapewear. Teejay had a body that was best described as fashionably desirable, but with boobs. She was slim with just enough curves. And her breasts were apparently a gift for their fifth anniversary. She was tone and fit and very aware that I was not.

"Tonya," she called out from the front of the car.

"Yes, ma'am?" I didn't even say 'ma'am' to my grandma. It rankled that Teejay insisted I use ma'am and sir.

“When we get there, I think it will be best if you get the kids ready for bed right away.”

The kids, Reece and Tyler, had been asleep most of the day. Fortunately car rides lulled them into nap-land. This ride, with the hours of backed up traffic trying to get out of D.C. and then construction, would have been torture otherwise.

“Do you want me to feed them dinner first? They’re going to be wound up once they wake up.” I asked.

“Whatever you think best. We are barely going to make it to our reservations. Ryan, I told you we should have left earlier. We won’t have time to unpack and change.”

Mr. T reached out and rubbed his wife’s shoulder. “It’s all fine darling. Tonya can finish unpacking the car once she puts the kids to bed. Isn’t that right?”

I hated when he did that. It wasn’t a question, we all knew it wasn’t a request. It was a passive aggressive way to look like he was a nice guy. Ryan Thomas was not nice. He was a bit of a jerk. A rich jerk. And his wife bent over backwards to make him happy.

“I...” I must have hesitated because Teejay finished answering for me.

“Of course, she can.”

Sherpa. I added another descriptive term to the mental list of job duties on the resume I was building in my head. So far being a nanny meant I was the body slave to two small charming individuals who pooped in designer clothes—the last outfit Reece had soiled beyond cleaning and probably cost Teejay more than I was paid in a month. I was also a laundress, a chef, a multilingual teacher, and now I got to schlep their belongings for the summer out of the car, and into the beach house. I closed my eyes and repeated the little mantra I had started telling myself.

I only needed to stay at this job for a year. That had been the intention, a year, or eighteen months to two years if I really liked it. And during this time I would start figuring out what my perfect career ahead looked like.

I wanted to know exactly where it was I wanted to go and define the clear steps needed to get there. This was my year to just let life take me where it would. I only needed to stay another six months or so. I would take the organizational and bonus language skills I learned on this job out into the real world.

I just needed to hang on through the Christmas holidays, and then I would leap. Right now, as Mr. T navigated the car up a small dark street to some promised beach destination, I was prepared to leap without the safety net of having another job.

The house was dark when we pulled up. I was more than ready to get out of the car and stretch my legs. Mr. T didn't say anything, he simply got out of the car. Teejay didn't move, but I was getting muscle cramps. I needed to stretch.

"What are you doing?" Teejay asked as I reached over the cases of drinks to open the door.

"I was going to get out. It's a bit cramped back here." I waited a second before adding, "Ma'am."

She wasn't that much older than I was, maybe ten years in her early thirties, but she acted like she was some kind of grande dame. I was definitely not cut out for this subservient lifestyle.

"Ryan hasn't turned out the power yet. There are no lights."

I could see that. I didn't understand what light had to do with me needing to stretch.

"We wait until the lights come on."

Tyler started to stir and fuss. Teejay and I had a bit of a staring contest. Was I supposed to get out of the car and get him? Or would she take care of that? After all, she was his mother, and she wasn't trapped behind luggage and supplies.

When she didn't move, I did. Getting out took some contortion. It didn't help that I had to practically climb over Reece to get out. Of course, I ended up waking her up as well.

I unstrapped Reece, and let her stand in the small space between the car seats as I climbed out of the car, and walked

around to the other side to pick up Tyler. By the time I turned past the back of the car, Teejay decided she could be bothered.

I watched as she opened the back door and lifted the baby from his car seat. He curled up and then stretched to his full length. It looked like he had grown during this excessively long afternoon in the car.

With visual confirmation that Tyler was being taken care of, I returned to the other side of the car and helped Reece climb down.

“Do you have to potty?” I asked.

I was surprised she was still dry. I had expected her to be surrounded by that warm, wet pee smell she sometimes had after a long nap. Now that she was technically potty trained, she wasn’t allowed in pull ups. Well, at least not when Teejay could discover them. It didn’t seem fair to me that the kid had to be shamed and uncomfortable when there was an easy solution.

Reece nodded. I whisked her up and headed toward the front door. I had a toddler who needed to pee, I didn’t have time to wait for the lights to be switched on.

“Tonya!” Teejay called out after me.

I ignored her and walked inside. The house was dark, but there was enough light coming in from the outside that I could make out the walls and doors.

“Mr. T, where’s the bathroom?” I called out. I was breaking so many rules with that one sentence. I was yelling inside, I was speaking to Ryan Thomas, I was in the house without any lights on, and technically, I was alone with Teejay’s husband.

I was never to be in a position where I could be perceived as being alone in the house with him. Ever. I don’t know who she trusted less, me or him. And frankly, I didn’t understand why she was willing to put up with that level of paranoia. I knew she wasn’t exactly worried that he might be attracted to me. She had told me as much.

“I don’t normally condone your lifestyle and habits,”— she was referring to the size of my ass, and my lack of gym

membership— “but I think you will be less of a distraction for my husband.”

I wanted to tell her if she was so worried about her husband being distracted by other women she needed to make him her ex-husband. If a man couldn't appreciate the woman who had given him two quite adorable children, he didn't deserve her. Especially when it was so obvious that Teejay put in the extra effort to maintain her looks. Tyler wasn't even a year old and Teejay didn't look like she had ever had a baby.

I wasn't there to steal her man, I was there to make sure her kid didn't ruin her baby Dior, or pee on me.

“First door past the stairs!” Mr. T yelled from somewhere.

I dashed to the door under the stairs, and found a tiny half bath. It had a toilet, and that's all we needed.

With Reece successfully using the toilet, I clapped for her.

“I'm so proud of you!”

“Tonya, what did I say about—”

I turned to face Teejay. “Reece made it all this way dry. Isn't that fantastic?” I didn't give her another chance to criticize me. This shouldn't have been about me anyway.

The lights came on with a blase. Teejay's face quickly turned from her regular sour expression to a big smile now that Reece could see her.

“Oh, well done darling girl, well done.”

**[Read the full story HERE!](#)**

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