

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a vibrant red rose. The hand is positioned in the center, with fingers gently gripping the stem. The rose is in full bloom, with its petals showing a rich, deep red color. The background is dark, making the rose and the hand stand out prominently.

HIS CHRISTMAS

Temptation

SIERRA
CARTWRIGHT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HIS CHRISTMAS TEMPTATION

TITANS: QUARTER HOLIDAYS COLLECTION

SIERRA CARTWRIGHT

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HIS CHRISTMAS WIFE

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QUARTER
HOLIDAYS
TITANS

HIS CHRISTMAS

NEW ORLEANS BILLIONAIRES: HOLIDAY EDITION

SIERRA CARTWRIGHT

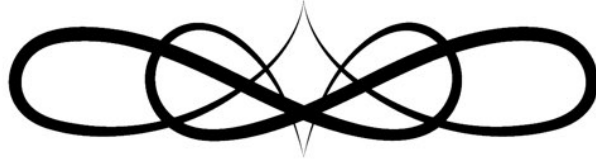
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEDICATION



Livia Grant, you're one in a million! Jennifer Bene, you're incredible. Thank you to the Black Light world for having me.

CHAPTER ONE



Not surprisingly Maddie was running late—a result of an over-committed schedule. She said yes to too many things, hoping she could somehow figure out how to meet all her obligations.

Less than an hour before, she'd been a volunteer, helping people select the perfect Christmas tree. At least New Orleans was unseasonably warm, and it hadn't been raining, so her fingers hadn't frozen like they had the previous year.

Still, she hated not being on time, even if it couldn't be helped.

After slinging her bag over her shoulder, she reached for the bell next to a nondescript door in the French Quarter.

Once she gave her name and turned her face to the camera, the lock released, and she slipped inside the BDSM club.

Christmas music thumped through her, not a thing like the piped-in stuff she'd been listening to all day. This sub-bass version of “Carol of the Bells” reverberated atmospherically off the black-painted walls.

In honor of the season, garland—decorated with festive, twinkling lights—wove around the stairway banister and the spindles.

At the top of the stairs, Trinity, the Quarter's receptionist, was in place behind the podium. Tonight she wore her usual catsuit, but she'd switched up her hair. Instead of pink or purple, her chin-length bob was colored half in red, half in green. As she looked up from a sheaf of papers, she offered a bright smile. "You came!"

"Sorry I couldn't get here sooner."

"I'm grateful for whatever time you can give us. We've got a record crowd tonight."

Maddie wasn't surprised. The owner, Mistress Aviana, had been planning the holiday extravaganza for months. And a surprise was expected to happen at midnight. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

"Your elf outfit is in the locker room. You'll be working the check-in desk with me and another volunteer."

She nodded. "Perfect." It was a job she'd done before, so she knew the basic routine.

As she hurried down the hall, she forced herself not to stop to look at all the items at the holiday bazaar. There appeared to be more vendors than usual, everything from clothing to vibrators, to hand-hewn discipline instruments, even imaginative furniture.

Her friend, Abigail was in front of a mirror, touching up her lipstick. As she turned, Maddie's jaw dropped.

Abigail was staffing the corset booth, and she was eye-catching in steampunk style. Her black overbust corset made her waist impossibly tiny. A bustled purple- brocade skirt trailed behind her, yet it was cut short in the front, dropping down to upper thigh. She completed her look with a hat, and Victorian style boots.

“Oh my God. You look sensational.” She always did, but tonight she’d taken it up a notch.

“This outfit’s my new favorite.”

“You make me want to buy one.” Even though she’d probably need to carry smelling salts if she wore something so tight.

“I’ll give you the friends-and-family discount.”

They exchanged hugs before Abigail hurried off, leaving Maddie alone.

Since most of tonight’s volunteers were going to be dressed as elves, dozens of costumes hung from a wheeled garment rack. Quickly she found one with her name attached.

She unzipped the bag, then stared at the offering. No. No. *No*. Frantically she shook her head. There was no way she could wear...this. The pieces were skimpier than anything she owned. Her swimsuit had at least twice that fabric—and she added a coverup on top of it.

Trinity pushed open the main door and popped her head inside. “The other elf just called. She’s running late, so it’s just you and me for now.”

No doubt that was Trinity’s polite way of saying, “*Hurry up.*”

The door closed behind her with a quiet click. With a soft sigh, Maddie reached for her costume. Stalling wouldn’t make this better.

The long-sleeved shirt had tails that knotted just beneath her breasts, leaving her midriff bare. Thankfully there was a green fringed vest that offered a tiny bit more modesty.

The bottoms were not much bigger than her panties. Bending over could expose enough of her rear to be a ticketable offense in some jurisdictions.

She slipped into the short elf boots, complete with ridiculously high turned-up toes, then grabbed the remaining item. *A hat*. She scowled at it since it was bigger than anything else she was wearing.

After shoving her personal belongings into her bag, she handed it over to the elf at the coat check.

Barely resisting the urge to pull down on the back of her shorts, she made her way to the reception area.

In the time she'd been gone, a long table had been erected and decorated with a tiny tree.

“I think we're ready.” Trinity exhaled. She ran through the usual information. “Scene names are on the left. Legal names are next to them. Everyone must sign in themselves, even owned slaves. If you have problems, just let me know.”

Maddie nodded. “Will do.” Trinity was adept at managing the most delicate D/s situations.

“We have a few guests on the list tonight, and Mistress Aviana has already received and approved their preliminary paperwork. We just have to go over the rules with them, and their sponsor needs to sign the paperwork.”

Usually Mistress Aviana oversaw that herself. She liked to vet everyone who walked into her dungeon. She didn't tolerate nonsense or drama, and ruthlessly got rid of anyone who caused it. Prior episodes had made her a great judge of character. But because she was busy preparing for her grand entrance at midnight, tonight's procedure had been tweaked.

“First-timers are required to stop by her throne after the parade.”

If they were smart, they’d pay her the proper homage.

“Be sure to look at the *notes* section. Vests and armbands for our dungeon monitors are stacked beneath the table.”

Maddie bent to confirm the location of the box. Then she nodded.

“Aviana’s court royalty will need to be gathered upstairs no later than 11:45; earlier is better. They’ll receive their vestments then.”

Just how extravagant is this party going to be? “Court royalty?”

“Along with Santa and his helper.” Trinity grinned. “The invitations made it clear that check-in will shut down at 11:30, because I’m in the parade, and I want the helpers to enjoy the event. We’ll reopen an hour or so later.”

“Anything else I need to know?”

“Private rooms are closed until 12:30, but they can be booked on the app. And this may seem obvious, but people can’t get a new membership tonight. One last thing. Everyone is supposed to bring a wrapped present for Santa’s bag. Gifts can be dropped off at the coat check.”

A bell sounded, and Trinity glanced at the monitor on the table, displaying the front-door camera feed. “Master Mason and Hannah.” She clicked a button to release the lock. “They’re royalty.”

Which made sense. At a fundraiser, Master Mason had bid an astronomical amount of money to win Hannah in a slave auction. Mistress Aviana wanted to keep him happy.

The next hour passed in a blur of frenzied activity. Then a group of six people arrived at once, including Evan Frost who was playing Santa.

Frost was filling in for another Dominant who had unexpectedly backed out, and she couldn't think of a worse choice. With his attitude, *Frost* wasn't just his name. It described his attitude. Maybe selecting him for the role was Mistress Aviana's idea of a holiday joke.

Another member of the royal court walked in, and Trinity helped her. Then a lone man strode up the stairs, boots echoing off the wood in a loud and purposeful cadence. The bottom dropped out of Maddie's heart.

Zander Henderson. The grinch himself. As usual, his grayish eyes were glacial—forbidding—and his face was set in rigid lines, as cold as the December Rocky Mountains.

This was a great time to take a break.

She glanced toward Trinity—who looked up and gave an apologetic half-shrug as she mouthed a quick, “Sorry.”

Which left Maddie to check-in the overwhelming Dominant. Knowing she was expected to be polite, she pasted on a smile so fake it could win her an award. “Merry Christmas!”

He dropped his duffel bag on the hardwood floor, and it landed with a hard *thunk*. “Are you always so miserable at hiding your emotions?”

“I beg your pardon?” This close, the man was overwhelming. He stood a notch over six feet tall, with impossibly broad shoulders. His forest-green T-shirt hugged him tightly, leaving little to the imagination. And his slacks...

Mercy. The tailoring was exquisite, conforming to his powerful thighs and trim waist.

Despite her best intentions, her mouth watered.

He leaned in a little closer and seared her with the full impact of his undivided attention. With his laser-like stare, he cut through her defenses. Her smile faded, and a chill raced through her.

“You were hoping Trinity would check me in so you could escape.”

She sucked in a shallow breath.

“Why, I wonder?”

Since he'd see the truth anyway, she took a drink of courage and tipped back her head so he could read the honesty in her eyes. “I'm not your biggest fan.” Nor were a few of her friends. Others found his darkness fascinating. A couple longed to chip away his icy countenance. “I've seen you on television.” On occasion he made a guest appearance on a show where eager entrepreneurs made pitches to millionaires and billionaires, hoping for large investments of money. He appeared to delight in crushing the hopes of the contestants. “You know what they call you? Killer of dreams. Mr. Dismal.” Maddie paused. She should stop there, but now that she was on a roll, she couldn't. “I call you a grinch.”

“Oof.” He winced as if her words stung him.

Good.

“That was honest.”

He'd woven a powerful spell over her—shutting out all sound and activity, leaving them as the only two people on the planet. To bring herself back to the present, she scanned the

list in front of her, searching for his name. “You’re a dungeon monitor tonight.” *Of course he was. Who better to enforce the club’s rules than the grinch himself?*

“Always happy to serve Mistress Aviana.”

Aware that his chilled glaze had never left her, she crouched to gather his vest and armband. “It’s not your first time, is it?”

“Meaning?” A hint of amusement teased his gorgeous lips.

The tiny crack in his forbidding countenance made her pulse skitter. “I mean...” Her voice cracked, and she hastily cleared her throat. “As a dungeon monitor.” The quicker she could get this over with, the better.

“It’s been a while. Why don’t you go over the rules with me, just to be sure?”

He’d been a member for years, which meant he was being intentionally difficult.

Since no one was waiting for help and Trinity was still wrapping up with her previous guests, Maddie had no excuse to deny his request. And the bastard knew it. “We’re expecting a record turnout, so we’ll have quite a few DMs tonight. Your role is to ensure that all play in the public areas, including Kinky Avenue, is safe, sane, and consensual.”

He nodded.

“Tore will be on duty as well.” The enormous, bearded, Viking-looking man was Mistress Aviana’s most trusted enforcer and had been with her since the beginning. “You can check in with him if you have any questions, but Mistress Aviana wants you to use your best judgment. You’re empowered to intervene in any scene. As you know, the club safe word is *red*.”

“Got it. Any particular place you want me to work?”

“Obviously we’d like our monitors to spread themselves out. The private rooms have someone specific assigned.”

“Has anyone said they’re monitoring Kinky Avenue?”

“No.” The small area, tucked away from the main dungeon, featured small, partitioned areas that appealed to specific roleplay scenarios. Wait times for certain rooms could be ridiculously long.

“You can find me there.”

Was he telling her that for general reference, or because he wanted her to know? “There will be a grand parade at midnight.”

“Is that Aviana’s big surprise?”

“She’ll make her entrance then, followed by her court. Trinity has asked for all the walkways to be clear by 11:45, so maybe ensure scenes start to wrap up around 11:30.”

He set an alarm on his watch.

“After the Christmas tree is lit, play can resume. The club will be open until four, but we don’t expect you to stay that long.”

After he nodded, she offered a pen and pointed to a line on her sheet. “If you’ll just sign here...”

His scrawl was illegible.

“Gifts for Santa’s toy bag are being collected at the coat check.” She slid his vest and armband across the table. “Enjoy your evening.”

Instead of moving away as she expected, he shrugged into the black vest. It was a little tight and made him look even

more fierce, ultra-Dominant. Things she definitely wasn't looking for.

"I'm useless with the armbands. Tricky to get it right with one hand. Do you mind giving me a hand?"

Trinity's guests were on their way toward the holiday bazaar, but the bell sounded a new arrival. "I'll get that while you help Master Zander. There's more room over there." She pointed to a place in the foyer.

Master Zander picked up his bag. Snarling, Maddie reached for the armband he'd walked off without. He stopped near the podium and tipped his hand toward the floor, indicating she should lead while he followed...which meant he'd get an eyeful of her half-uncovered derriere.

When they were in a quiet corner, he placed his bag on the floor again, then took a tiny step toward her. "Where's the best place?"

Her thoughts fractured. "For what?"

"My armband." He grinned.

"Biceps."

He turned a little so that he faced her at an angle. Why, oh why, was his shirt so tight, making his muscles so obvious? And why did he smell like spice and seduction?

She had to reach up to fasten the armband into place.

"It's crooked."

Most men would be satisfied that it wouldn't slide off or wasn't too tight. But not the grinch. "It's not bad." Who was she trying to convince? Herself, because she didn't want to get that close to him a second time?

He scowled in a dominant way that threatened retribution, and a wicked, dormant part of her wanted to experience it.

With a sigh, she pulled apart the opened ends, then rejoined them, being sure they were lined up perfectly. Then she stepped back to double check the look.

DM.

Why did the meaning all of a sudden change in her mind to Dangerous Master?

This time, she took a couple of extra seconds to be sure it was perfect.

“Much better.” He nodded. “Thank you.”

“Enjoy your evening.” She paused for a second, and he waited. “Sir.”

“I like the sound of that on your lips.”

Every heart-tripping moment with this man was excruciating. For her sanity, she needed to escape.

Trinity glanced over her shoulder. “When you’re available, I could use a hand.”

Maddie seized the opportunity to escape.

And when she was back at the check-in table, she stole a glance over her shoulder.

He stood there, arms folded, considering her.

Pretending as if the world hadn’t suddenly wobbled beneath her, she returned her attention to the couple in front of her, determined to put the grinchy Dominant out of her mind.

CHAPTER TWO



“It’s almost eleven.” Trinity exhaled as she looked at Maddie. “You’ve been working your rear off.”

Cece, the other elf, had arrived at ten, and that helped them to get caught up. Fortunately the members had been patient, even singing rounds of “Jingle Bells,” mostly off-key, as they waited. But this was the first time since they’d opened the doors that they’d had even a momentary lull.

“I’m sure you want to escape from behind this table.”

“That would be awesome.” Though Trinity had thoughtfully provided chairs, Maddie had found it so much easier to stand. And while the elf boots were cute, the insides had no support. *Cute, but killer.*

“Why don’t you take a fifteen-minute break?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“On second thought...”

Maddie bit back an instinctive moan. She was looking forward to trying out one of the holiday-themed mocktails at the bar.

“If you do me a favor, you don’t need to come back for the rest of the night.”

“I’ll take that deal.”

“At 11:20-ish, will you remind the dungeon monitors that all the walkways need to be cleared?”

And face Master Zander again? Her instinctive reaction was to ask Cece to handle that responsibility.

“Since the parade starts at midnight, you don’t need to come back.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.” Even though she’d had a long day, Maddie had planned to stay on duty until the club closed.

Trinity looked toward Cece, who nodded her assent. “We’ll get an hour break during the parade. And the rest of the night won’t be so crazy. We’ll have a chance to sit down.”

“I—”

“Go.” Cece waved her hand, as if shooing Maddie away. “Seriously.”

Something cool and refreshing to drink appealed to her and so did getting off her feet.

The bell danced with more arrivals.

Trinity laughed. “Escape while you can.”

With her heart beating faster than it had at any time in the previous hours, she did.

The foyer was crowded with people talking and purchasing items at the bazaar. Abigail was cinching a woman into a stunning white corset.

Aware of time ticking, Maddie hurried toward the bar. Mistress Aviana had decorated the place in pure New Orleans style, with LSU pendants, autographed Saints jerseys, hurricane glasses filled with Mardi Gras beads, and paintings

of historical landmarks. For the holidays, lights and garlands had been added. Enormous glass ornaments—in purple, green, and gold—dangled from shelves as well as the ceiling.

Hors d'oeuvres were available against the far wall.

Maddie perched on an open barstool facing a window. From her vantage, she had a view of parts of the dungeon and its equipment, including Mistress Aviana's throne. Additional seating that wasn't normally there flanked each side. There was also a large velvet-covered chair off to one side with a roped-off area near it. *For Santa?*

Dominating the area was an enormous unlit Christmas tree with a fanciful, bedazzled glass ornament in Mistress Aviana's likeness.

"Can I get you something to drink?" The bartender slid a white napkin in front of her.

"I haven't had a chance to look."

He offered a specialty menu for her to consider. Because there were so many attendees this evening, no alcohol was being served.

"I'll give you a minute."

While he helped someone else, she scanned the holiday menu that was filled with specialty beverages. On the other side were a bounty of choices from power drinks to sodas, even bottled coffee drinks.

When he returned, she pointed to the top choice. "Rudolph's Nose Warmer."

"Excellent choice." First, he rimmed a martini glass with sugar, then he muddled cherries before mixing the beverage in

front of her. Lime, a few splashes of house-made grenadine, then a spritzing of flavored seltzer water.

After adding a wedge of lime, he slid the mocktail toward her and waited for her to take a sip. “How is it?”

“Wonderful.” In addition to being satisfying, it was refreshing. “Exactly the right mix of sweet and sour.”

Even though nothing other than water was allowed outside the bar, she asked for an exception to order two more for Trinity and Cece.

“Only because it’s the holidays.” He grinned. “And because one’s for Trinity.”

Oh? She smiled back.

After he whipped up the drinks, he poured them into lidded cups, and she carefully carried them to the front of the club where Kaylee, Santa’s helper, was scrawling her name on the check-in paper. She was already in costume, wearing a hooded red A-line dress accented with white faux fur.

“We appreciate you doing this,” Trinity said. “Master Evan is waiting for you at the coat check.”

Kaylee went still. “Master Evan?”

“Yes. He’s filling in tonight because of an unexpected emergency.” Trinity tipped her head to the side. “Is that a problem?”

“He’s my boss.”

And she’d told Maddie one of the reasons she came here to play was to destress from working for the demanding bastard every day.

“I’m sorry.” Trinity sighed. “I had no idea.”

The Quarter honored their members' privacy, and many attendees used scene names. Unless both parties agreed, there was no acknowledgment of a prior relationship outside of the club walls.

“No worries.” In her customary way, Trinity went into problem-solving mode. “I’ll find someone to fill in for you.” She glanced at Maddie. “You’re about the same size as Kaylee, but you’ve already been working more hours than I’d like.”

Just then Master Evan strode over.

Damn. Maddie had never seen the Dominant look anything like this sexy. He wore the expected pants that were tucked into large boots, and he’d donned a Santa hat. But his broad chest was bare.

“Is there a problem?”

Trinity shook her head. “I wasn’t aware of certain facts, so we’re just sorting out options.”

“Ah.” He directed his attention to Kaylee. “May I have a word with you, Ms. Robbins?”

Trinity shook her head. “Not without her consent.”

“It’s okay.” Kaylee grinned. “I deal with him all day.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to while you’re here.”

“I appreciate that.”

While the pair moved to the side, Maddie addressed Trinity. “If you need me to switch places with Kaylee, let me know.” Assisting Master Evan was preferable to seeing Master Zander again.

Never taking her narrowed gaze off the couple, Trinity nodded. “Will do.”

Maddie pushed through the frosted glass door with its beautifully etched fleur-de-lis that separated the reception and foyer areas from the rest of the club.

In the dungeon, the music was much louder, making the atmosphere vibrate. Or maybe that was her nerves.

If she were smart, she’d visit Kinky Avenue first; that way she wouldn’t have to keep dreading the fact she needed to face Master Zander again.

Instead, stalling, she decided to begin at the far edges of the open space and wend her way inward.

Making navigation through the St. Andrew’s crosses, spanking benches, demonstrations, cupping tables, and suspension rigs even more difficult, workers were moving through the area erecting velvet-roped barriers to ensure a clear pathway for the upcoming parade.

Finally, aware of the clock ticking, pulse turning thready, she headed for Kinky Avenue.

The stairs leading to the second floor were cordoned off, but here too the banisters were lit with festive lights. The landing had been cleared of the comfort couches.

The roleplay area didn’t have as many people as usual, and the few who were watching chatted amongst themselves—not an easy feat with the music blasting around them.

A DM stood with his back against the wall, where he could survey three different scenes. Maddie exhaled when she realized the man was shorter than Master Zander, and he was far less intimidating. “Trinity asked me to remind you that this area needs to close no later than 11:45.”

“Was going to give them another five minutes.”

“Sounds good.” She edged past him, only to miss a step.

Master Zander stood all the way at the end, facing her, arms crossed, head tilted to one side. Even though they were not alone, all his attention was directed toward her, as if she were the only woman on the planet. Her tummy turned inside out.

Refusing to let him get the best of her, she drew back her shoulders and purposefully walked toward him—well, as much as she could with her ridiculous boots.

Standing in front of him, wishing she were much, much taller, she repeated her earlier, rehearsed words. “Trinity asked me to remind you that this area needs to close no later than 11:45.”

“I remembered your instructions very well.”

“Good.” She pivoted to leave, and the turned-up toe tripped her, plunging her into his arms.

He didn’t just steady her, he held her for far too long. She should have pulled away immediately, but she didn’t. Instead, she allowed herself to momentarily luxuriate in the strength of his muscles.

How long had it been since a man had offered any support? And how odd that it came from him.

“Do those shoes come with hazard pay?”

“Thank you.” She wiggled away from him, but he retained a light grip on her upper arms. “Not sure what happened.”

“You were trying to escape.”

“No...I wasn’t.”

“Hmm.”

He'd seen straight through her lie.

A quick movement nearby caught her attention, and she instinctively glanced in that direction.

“The scene I've been watching.” Master Zander whispered the words into her ear, feathering strands of her hair. “You might enjoy it.”

“I need to be going.”

He chuckled as if sensing her lie.

She had no place to be, other than here, with him.

Instead of excusing herself, she allowed him to turn her toward the roleplay space. Others she'd passed had included a schoolroom, Victorian bed chamber, a principal's office, and a jail cell. This was meant to be for interrogations. Leather straps and tawses hung from a wall painted to resemble crumbling stones. And in a corner was a chair with a hole cut in the seat.

In the center of the floor, a blindfolded woman wearing only a demicup bra and a thong was on her tiptoes on top of a thick acrylic stand. Her wrists were tied together, and her arms were stretched high above her head, attached to a ring hanging from the ceiling.

A man dressed as a corrections officer circled her. Even though she was blindfolded, she continued to breathe easily, in trust, maybe.

Master Zander placed his hands lightly on Maddie's shoulders. “Have you ever been bound like that?”

A shiver rocked Maddie's spine. “No.” And truthfully she had only scened a couple of times. “I usually volunteer when I

come here.” Which he had to know. He’d spent many nights broodingly watching the comings and goings at the club.

“Would you like to be?”

She froze. *Yes*. But there was no way she could admit that to someone like Master Zander.

The man stopped behind his submissive and flogged her in rhythmic motions. She tipped her head back as she parted her lips.

On numerous occasions, Maddie had watched twosomes and moresomes play, but she’d never seen anyone so sensually content. Though she was nervous to expose that much of herself, part of her envied the expression of joy on the woman’s face.

The Top paused, stepped back, waited a moment, then wielded his flogger harshly between her legs. Jerking, she cried out, and he reacted immediately by soothing her with his hand, continuing until she broke, shuddering and crying as she came.

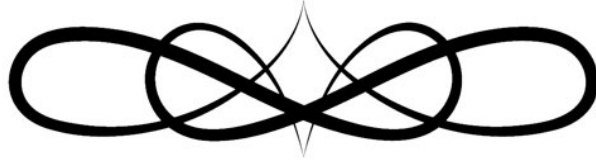
Maddie couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move.

“It’s Christmas. Dreams come true.” Master Zander’s words a purr, part promise, part invitation.

“I...” She gathered what remained of her wits and pulled herself away from him. “The parade’s about to begin.”

Before she could do something stupid, like drop to her knees and beg for a flogging like the woman in front of her had just received, she fled.

CHAPTER THREE



When the last participants left Kinky Avenue, a worker erected barriers to close it off, part of the effort to ensure all walkways were clear for the parade.

Zander strode back to the main dungeon. Once there, he instinctively sought out Maddie.

Right up until the moment he walked through the Quarter's front door, he'd considered cancelling. What he didn't need or want was holiday frivolity. Instead he'd planned to do what he did every weekend from Thanksgiving to New Year's: morosely sip whiskey and watch the clock, tortured by the memories of Christmas past, fighting to shove aside the whispers of what could have been, wondering how the fuck he'd make it through the night.

But he'd bowed beneath the force that was Mistress Aviana's determination. She'd insisted she needed his help, but the truth was, she hadn't. The other truth was, he was grateful.

Though she was nothing like the wife he'd lost, Maddie was a breath of fresh air. From the moment she'd looked at him, surprised, clearly searching for a way not to help him with his armband, he'd been intrigued. Her startling blue eyes

flashed with emotion, raw and on display for the entire world to see.

Pain was there. If his guess was right, it ran as deep as his own. And like him, she buried it beneath the surface so she could keep going. He might turn to his own demons to find relief. But how did Maddie find solace? *By taking care of others?*

She visited the club on a regular basis. *Why?* For the companionship? Because of her most secret desires?

The fiery, no-holds barred elf had called him out for being a bastard. Though her words had been an arrow to the heart, the criticism was well-deserved. At one time, he'd been a better person.

But now...?

How many years had it been since he'd been enthusiastic about anything? Maddie with the unflinching way she stared him down had gotten through to him.

And then there was her reaction to the scene they'd watched together.

He sucked in a shallow breath.

Though he'd had what he considered an amazing relationship, BDSM hadn't been part of it. He'd been willing to forgo that connection because everything else had been perfect. But less than half an hour ago, with his hands cupping Maddie's shoulders, a need that had been dormant for three years sparked to life. And he was hungry for more. The problem was, he wasn't sure he was good enough for her.

The worst possible thing would be for him to cloak her in his darkness.

Before he had a chance to locate her, Hayes McCall—one of his closest friends—joined him. Misery loved company.

They shook hands, then moved to a place near the wall to get out of the way.

Zander spoke first. “You planning to watch the parade?”

“Hell, no.” Hayes shook his head. “Heading to the bar. Don’t have a lot of tolerance for all this Christmas crap. Ho, ho, fucking ho. Open your wallet a little wider and smile while you do it.” His unwanted divorce had broken his heart and left him jaded and without half of his fortune.

“Got a business meeting in town Thursday,” Zander said. “Thinking of grabbing a drink at the Maison Sterling before heading back.”

“Susanna gets Trenton this year, and she’s taking him to Aspen.” He scowled. “Shoot me a text with the time; I’ll be there.”

After they parted ways, Zander once again scanned the area. When he didn’t immediately find Maddie, he moved to a more central location, near a St. Andrew’s cross.

The moment she neared him, the tiny hairs on his nape stood at attention and desire gripped him. No, it wasn’t desire. It was a primal hunger, and it ricocheted through him, making his heart pound.

Zander had a sudden, stunning image of her, in the interrogation room, long, wavy brunette hair spilling over her shoulders and down her back as she submitted to his pleasure. He wanted to please her, to make her dreams come true.

As if sensing his scrutiny, she glanced in his direction. Their gazes met, then held. He angled his head to one side, part invitation part command. She glanced at the floor and

worried her lower lip. Would it bruise? If it did, he would kiss away the ache.

He considered going to her. But he'd made his interest in her abundantly clear already, and he wanted her to come to him of her own free will. Dare he hope? As he'd reminded himself earlier, it was Christmas after all.

Slowly, all too slowly, she looked back at him, then started toward him in her too-revealing, too-adorable shorts, and those ridiculous shoes that had tripped her into his embrace. Perhaps he'd have them bronzed and keep them forever.

She stopped in front of him, but when she started to say something, the overhead lights flickered three times before they dimmed. The music stopped, plunging the dungeon into silence.

As a murmur rippled through the crowd, Maddie glanced over her shoulder at him. Zander shrugged. He had no more idea what was going on than anyone else did.

Large monitors descended from the ceiling, and a trumpet blast rent the air.

Everyone looked up to the man on the landing space on the stairs; it was now serving as a balcony of sorts.

“Hear ye; hear ye!”

His image simultaneously appeared on the screens. Aviana had certainly been keeping her AV department busy.

“Tonight, we present to you the royal court.” With a flourish, the crier extended his arm toward the top of the stairs.

Now wearing a cloak, Trinity descended the stairs, stopping to curtsy and wave from the balcony.

Dungeon Master Tore followed. If it was even possible, the burly Viking was larger than usual, and his black vest strained at the seams. Like Trinity before him, Tore paused to bow before continuing his descent.

He was followed by Master Mason and his beautiful and very pregnant bride. Hannah, wearing a long tight fitting black gown. For the first time since he'd lost his wife and child, the sight of a woman in her radiant beauty did not stab Zander with grief.

Rafe Sterling and his fiancée, Hope, were next. Rafe had approached Zander a year or so ago with a business idea, and he never returned the call. Now Zander regretted it. How much life had passed him by while he'd been living in the past?

That ended tonight.

Next, two of Aviana's slaves made their way down the staircase wearing tight black pants and leather harnesses. Whatever else she had in store for the evening was certainly going to be memorable.

The crier blasted his trumpet again.

Two spotlights hit the top of the stairs, and a camera zoomed in on her.

Arms spread wide, Mistress Aviana invited adoration, and she received it: cheers, shouts, hoops, hollers, applause.

Maddie turned to him. "Wow."

The club owner was always sensational. Tonight she was spectacular. Her tight silver lamé boots were at least six inches high and went to her mid-thigh.

She was poured into a one-piece silver outfit that fit like a second skin—allowing no secrets.

Her ice-blue cape had an unbelievably long train and a stand-up collar that framed her face.

Her hair, white tonight, reached her ankles. A crown with dagger-like spikes went straight up, at least a foot. The tips were shaped like snowflakes and glowed like diamonds.

But it was her makeup that left Zander speechless. Her eyes were violet—not a color found in nature. And their brightness seared. They were fringed by enormously long, frosty white lashes. Every time she moved, she shimmered. With a precise back-and-forth motion, she waved her hand like the royalty she was.

Two elves joined her, offering support as she made her way down. Unlike the others, she didn't stop on the balcony. Then she disappeared from view.

The house lights came up slightly, Christmas techno music blasted from the speakers, and the parade began. Trinity waltzed into the dungeon first, followed by a stern-looking Tore.

The rest of the royal court followed with Mason cupping Hannah's arm for support. How she moved so gracefully, Zander had no idea. But he certainly admired it.

Maddie, with an abandon he adored, waved back to everyone, whooping along with the rest of the crowd.

Rafe and Hope waved as they tossed Mardi Gras beads into the crowd.

Finally Aviana entered, riding in a sleigh that was pulled by her harnessed slaves. People screamed and cheered as they took her in, sitting on a bench and covered with a shimmering blanket.

At the rear of the procession was Evan Frost, dressed as Santa and belting out a hearty, “Ho, ho, ho.”

Right behind him was his helper, handing out candy canes, and Maddie reached for one.

She grinned after she secured her prize. “This is so much fun!”

Her enthusiasm was infectious, and Zander grinned back at her.

“Isn’t it?” she repeated.

His admission might be reluctant, but the depth of the sincerity surprised him. “Yeah.”

“If I didn’t know better, Master Zander, I’d think the grinch’s heart is getting bigger.”

He scowled, but she laughed at him. The sound was as pure as it was gleeful. She dazzled him. Fuck if he could remain unhappy for even five seconds in her company.

After completing three circuits, the royalty took their seats. Then Mistress Aviana was assisted from her sleigh and onto the throne that sat on a raised dais.

A group of elves detached her slaves from their harnesses and moved the sleigh over toward the tree and Santa’s high-back, velvet-covered chair.

Evan and his assistant took their places, and then the trumpeter signaled another announcement.

“Welcome to the Quarter’s Holiday Extravaganza! On Milady’s command, the tree will be lit, and Santa will start reaching into his bag with presents for the naughtiest of attendees.” He paused for dramatic effect. “You know who you are.”

Cheers and chuckles rippled through the atmosphere.

“Our Lady *invites* everyone to parade past the reviewing stand.”

The emphasis on the word meant it was a royal decree.

Aviana’s slaves offered their assistance as she stood. “Join me in counting down from ten.” Her voice boomed melodically through the entire dungeon. No doubt there was a mic hidden on that bodysuit, but where was beyond imagination. “Ten!”

The crowd joined in getting louder and more raucous as the numbers dropped lower.

Then, exactly on cue, the tree exploded with bright, blinding color. The club’s AV team switched on red and green spotlights that danced off the tinsel Zander hadn’t even noticed until now.

The music cranked up, and Mistress Aviana resumed her seat.

Her loyal subjects fell into a long, snaking line that would lead them past the ice princess and her court and straight to a visit with Santa.

Maddie grabbed his arm. “We have to do this.”

Of course she refused to disappoint, and he loved her for it.

“You’re a DM.” She shrugged. “Your absence would be noted.”

She had a point. Aviana would certainly not be pleased if he didn’t pay his respects, especially after she’d made her wishes clear.

The line was slow and painstaking, and for a brief second, he envied Hayes for making his timely escape.

In the end he offered his arm to Maddie. “Shall we?” He could deny her nothing.

When they eventually reached the reviewing stand, he shook hands with Rafe and promised to call soon.

“Do that.”

Zander understood. He’d been given a second chance to keep his word.

Then he introduced Hannah to Maddie. Unsurprisingly, within a minute, Maddie knew all the details of the upcoming birth. The way she made friends was remarkable and would be an asset in his venture capital business.

Where the hell did that thought come from?

He shook his head to clear it as she curtsied to Aviana. Following suit, he bowed.

“Thank you both for your service this evening. I am well pleased.” She then slid him a pointed glance “I trust you’re enjoying yourselves.”

He waited for Maddie to respond.

She didn’t disappoint, curtseying as she spoke. “Yes, Milady.”

He concurred. “Indeed.” Because the line behind them was piling up, he guided Maddie away. “How about a visit with Santa?”

“I didn’t bring a gift.”

“Lucky for you, I did.”

“I, ah...”

He wanted this experience for her. Deep down he suspected she wanted it too.

“The line is really long.”

Zander shrugged. “It is.”

“If you don’t mind, I think I’d like to.” She unwrapped her candy cane and stuck the end in her mouth, sucked on the confectionary with wild abandon and a sassy twinkle in her blue eyes.

His cock hardened, surging with insistent demand. He turned away to adjust his pants, now wishing he’d worn a pair that had pleats. Anything to hide his reaction to his luscious soon-to-be submissive.

“Master Zander?”

Jesus. The way that sounded in her mouth...

“I’ve got something for you.”

“Oh?”

Maddie leaned in close, closer, and her scent—sweetness and musk—clobbered him, all but making him a drooling fool. “Yes?” He croaked the question.

She tucked the empty wrapper into his pocket.

Fuck me. “Brat.”

“Maybe.” With a grin, she cut the line a little to hug Santa’s helper.

When he reached her, she was finishing up her chat.

“Be sure to call me tomorrow.” Maddie took Kaylee’s hands. “I’ll be at the shelter for some of the day, but I want to hear from you.”

Kaylee glanced over her shoulder at Evan before nodding her agreement.

Most Dominants stepped out of the way while their partner sat on Santa's lap, but Zander stayed beside her.

"Ho, ho, ho!" Evan was certainly into his role, and Zander was stunned that the bastard could fake the demeanor so well. "Have you been a good girl?"

"Always!" Maddie made a small circle over her head, indicating a halo.

In her case, that was probably accurate. The saucy way she licked that damn candy cane notwithstanding.

Evan reached into his bag and pulled out a gift.

With a grin, she stood.

Her joy was palpable. "How long has it been since you received a gift?"

She hedged. "I prefer to give them rather than get them."

"So a while perhaps?" He'd like to remedy that.

Around them, the rope lines were being dismantled and play was resuming. "There's a cuddle couch over there."

Instead of sitting next to him, she perched on the arm and tore into the gift with wild abandon.

Zander winced. He unwrapped presents, his manner so precise that his sister teased that he could reuse the paper. Her pleasure served as a lesson to him.

Oohing and aahing, she pulled out a flogger and shook out the pink suede strands. "It's gorgeous."

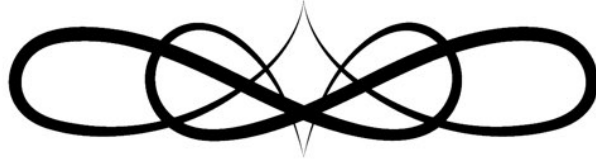
He nodded. It wasn't something he would have chosen, but its supple femininity suited her. "It can be sensuous. Or

dastardly.”

Mouth slightly parted, she met his gaze.

“Would you like to feel it on your body?” He paused, giving her a moment to process his question. Then he curled his hand around hers. “Your name is first on the list for the interrogation room.”

CHAPTER FOUR



A shiver rocked Maddie—giddiness combined with nerves. It had been two years since she played with a Dominant, almost that long since a man had touched her in any way.

“What do you say?” Zander’s tone was gentle, and she appreciated that he exuded no pressure.

“You’re on duty.”

“I’ll take care of that.”

“I...” A thousand thoughts crowded through her mind. Maddie was tired of the hunger, the loneliness.

She met his gaze. “Yes.”

Tomorrow she might regret this, but in this moment she wanted the experience. Watching that scene, then receiving the flogger, emboldened her. Or maybe he was right about the magic of Christmas. Not that it mattered. She fully intended to enjoy whatever the next few moments brought.

Together they went to the front desk, and he ripped apart the ends of the armband, then turned it—and the vest—over to Trinity.

She grinned. “Have fun!”

After collecting his bag from the coat check, he guided Maddie through the crowd. Because the interrogation room was at the far end of Kinky Avenue, they had more privacy than they would have anywhere else except for one of the upstairs rooms.

“What’s your safe word?”

“I’ll stick with *red*.”

“And for slow?”

“Yellow.” She hesitated. Now that they were alone, it was becoming much more real. “You need to know it’s been a very long time for me.”

“Same.”

His features were so very strong and masculine, but as he spoke to her, his voice was gentle. How could he possibly be the same man she’d jeered at on television?

“This is more about pleasure than anything else, my trusting submissive.”

Zander’s words reassured her. She did trust him. Why, she wasn’t sure, but she did. “I’d prefer to keep all my clothes on.”

“I have no objection.” He offered a hand to assist her onto the platform. “Would you like your legs to be secured?”

From experience, she knew it was easier for her to let go emotionally if she was physically restrained. She nodded, hoping she appeared more confident than she felt.

His motions were sure, and he took time to make certain she was comfortable.

“Now your arms.”

She raised them, and he bound her wrists before attaching her to the overhead ring.

He trailed his fingers up her sides, igniting her nerve cells. “Remember this is an interrogation, and I intend to find out what you like.” He reached an arm around her and pressed his palm against her pelvis, nudging her backward a little. “I’d like to have your beautiful ass sticking out.”

Responding to his command, she arched her back slightly.

“A little more.”

More?

“You have a perfectly spankable behind.”

She drank in his approval.

“I said *more*, little sub.” Reinforcing his point, he dug his fingers into the fleshiest part of her buttocks.

Instead of giving into the instinct to pull away, she took a breath and did as he said.

“Perfect in every way.”

He kneaded her butt cheeks, pushing them together, making her gasp from the bite of his fingertips.

“How do you like this?”

She closed her eyes.

“If you try to keep secrets, I will persist until I uncover all of them.”

The hint of playfulness vanished from his voice.

“Maddie? Do you understand?”

She jerked, trying to escape him.

“I’m waiting for your answer.”

“It’s... Oh!” He spanked the top of her right thigh. “It’s amazing, Sir.”

“Glad you like it.” He trailed his fingers lower to stroke between her legs.

As he continued to caress her, she clamped her lips, trying to hold back her emotions.

“Are you hungry to experience your flogger?”

She nodded.

“On your back?”

Please.

“On your front?”

Was she brave enough? “That...” Maddie gulped. “That scares me.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“But if you’re going to do it, can we start with that so I can get it over with?”

He chuckled. The sound fed right into her ear, and his warm breath whispered against the side of her neck. “Just for that, you’ll have to wait and writhe in your dread.”

Tormenting her, he instead reached through her thighs to cup her mound. Slowly he began to close his fingers, making her gasp and jerk, shooting a desire through her so real that it stole her breath away.

“Do you want me to put the heel of my hand there so that you can get yourself off?”

He was wicked. *This* was wicked. She enjoyed the scenes she participated in and found them rewarding psychologically, but she’d never been on the cusp of an orgasm this fast with

anybody before. Maddie reassured herself that it was because she'd spent so much time alone and grieving. But a traitorous part of her mind whispered the truth. It was because of him and the intuitive command he had over her body.

“Talk to me, Maddie. Tell me what you want.”

She'd never had a climax anywhere other than a bedroom before. It wasn't all that unusual at the Quarter, but it was outside her comfort zone.

Masterfully he squeezed hard again.

Because the fabric of her clothing was so skimpy, he easily slipped a finger beneath her shorts so that he touched bare skin. She gasped and froze. He electrified her, and excitement poured through her veins.

“Is this okay, perfect little submissive?”

“Oh. God.” It was intimate and dangerous, and she couldn't get enough. He made her ache.

Realizing he wouldn't continue without consent, she all but begged. “Please.” She arched her back, and he responded, wrapping a strong arm around her, pulling her as far back as her bonds allowed.

Maddie was grateful for him knowing what she needed. She no longer had to think, and that allowed her to sink more deeply into her submissive experience.

“Beautiful.”

As if they'd been together dozens of times, he stroked a finger inside her. “Remember it's an interrogation. Tell me what you want.”

“Everything.” Her voice was hoarse with demand.

He entered her with a second finger, stretching her. Slowly he eased back out to press against her clit. Then, sexually driving her to the brink, he abraded the tiny bundle of nerves with his thumbnail. "I like having you inside me." His commands had emboldened her, and she gave herself over to the thrill of the roleplay they were immersed in.

Driving her mad, he gripped her womanhood again. "This is mine."

She gasped, both from the pain and from his possessiveness. "Yes, Sir."

"Could you come from me fingering you?"

She had no idea. "I don't know."

"Let's find out."

In the distance, above the music, people's voices reached her. Anybody could walk by and see her riding her Dominant's hand. At one time, that might have unnerved her. But tonight it provided additional excitement. "I want to come."

"My pleasure." He changed his position slightly and reached around to cup one of her breasts, teasing her through the material of her elf outfit.

The additional sensation pushed her over the edge. Screaming his name, Maddie pitched forward, but he was there with extra support as she shattered in his arms.

Time fractured, and when she was able to gulp in a full breath, he was caressing her, whispering soft, meaningless words.

"Are you okay?"

I'm not sure I ever will be again.

“You were spectacular.”

Once she was steady, he slowly circled her until he stood in front of her. Maddie shook off the orgasmic aftereffects so she could meet his emotion-filled gray eyes.

With her watching, he licked his fingers.

Heaven help her. “That’s so sexy.”

“And now I think you’re about ready.”

“Ready?” She furrowed her eyebrows. *How could there possibly be anything more?* “For what?”

“For your flogging to begin.”

If the scene ended right this moment, she would have been more than satisfied.

“You’re exquisite.” Sincerity etched his words, making her believe them, if only for the moment.

He left her long enough to fetch the flogger. Then he held it in front of her, twisting his wrist so that the strands made tiny circles in the air.

Transfixed, she watched his seductive dance.

“Every time you look at it you will remember this evening.”

As if she needed an outside reminder.

He stopped what he was doing and adjusted his grip to draw the handle down her chest, pausing between her breasts.

“Should we start here?”

He continued lower, over her bare midriff and her pelvis. “Or here?” Firmly he pressed the hilt between her legs.

“I’ve never experienced that before.” When she’d watched the earlier scene, she hadn’t been sure she could endure such a thing. “It’s slightly terrifying.”

“Is it a red? Or would you like to trust me? Because this is an interrogation, you’re expected to be honest.” He paused, angling the flogger to exert more pressure. “I have ways of making you talk.”

The statement was so ludicrous that his mouth twitched. Then he smiled in earnest. The transformation melted her defenses. “I want to try it.”

“I love bravery.” He walked around her several times, and she was hyperaware of his echoing footfalls, despite the noise around them.

He created an atmosphere that made it seem as if they were alone in the world.

When he stopped behind her, she froze.

“Relax.” He pressed a gentle kiss to that tender spot between her neck and her shoulder.

“I’m not sure I can.”

He skimmed the leather thongs across her shoulders.

How hard would his lash fall?

“You’re meant for this...meant for me. “

His flogging began as a gentle exploration, the strands landing lightly on her back. As she relaxed, they became a bit more intense.

Then he flicked harder, wrapping them around her waist, grabbing hold of her skin. The intensity aroused her.

Trust swallowed trepidation. She consciously surrendered to the bondage and closed her eyes.

He was an expert, intermingling harder strokes with softer ones, ratcheting up the desire within her.

When she moaned her pleasure, he moved slightly to the left, then to the right, changing up where his strokes fell.

The flogging ended, but he touched her shoulder, keeping them connected as he walked around to stand in front of her.

“You’re ready.”

It wasn’t a question. And he was right.

With figure-eight strokes, he crisscrossed her breasts and upper body.

This was more than she could have ever imagined. He filled her senses and found a way inside her heart.

Startling her, the strands met her pussy. She opened her eyes to find him looking at her.

“We’re exploring what you like. And you’re being honest.”

For a moment, she worried her lower lip. She’d be forever curious if she turned back now. “I want to go on.”

“Yeah. So do I.”

The knowledge that this brought him pleasure startled her.

“I love doing this to you.”

One evening, Maddie and her friends had discussed the D/s dynamic. They’d insisted a submissive was just as powerful as a Dominant. A bottom needed a Top. And yet a Top was only fulfilled when he was being his own authentic self. It was a symbiotic union, where each needed the other to be complete.

Then the dozens of suede strands were everywhere, on her legs, belly, and then between her legs, reigniting the fire that the orgasm had caused.

The leather all but made love to her inner thighs and pussy.

“I’m greedy. I could do this to you all night.”

The rigid outline of his erect cock pressed against his pants. “*Oh.*”

“I mean what I say.”

Suddenly she wanted him inside her, consequences be damned. She wasn’t the type for a one-night stand, but right now nothing mattered besides being with him.

“Zander...”

“I love the sound of my name on your lips.”

“Master...” Her voice cracked.

With gentle, tempting strokes, he continued to flick the suede against her most tender flesh.

“I want to have sex with you.”

“Jesus.” Instantly he lowered the flogger. “Maddie...” Eyes wide and stark, he dragged a hand through his hair. “There’s nothing I want more. But you need to understand that I have no expectations.”

“It’s not about that. It...”

He waited.

“About connection. I need it.”

Frowning, he exhaled.

“This is an interrogation room.” Bravely she continued on. “Do you want me?”

“Do I want you? More than my next heartbeat.”

With exquisite care that she'd never experienced from anyone else, he unfastened her bonds. Once he'd rubbed the circulation back into her skin, he helped her down from the platform.

“Is there someplace special you'd like to go? We can stay at a hotel in the French Quarter, or we can go to my house. Or yours, if that makes you more comfortable.”

“Your place, if that's okay.” At least she could escape if she lost her nerve or changed her mind.

“Anything you desire, Maddie.” He fisted a hand into her hair and pulled back her head so that she had no choice but to meet his steely gaze. *“Anything.”*

CHAPTER FIVE



Close to an hour later, they pulled up into the driveway of Zander's North Shore mansion.

It had taken some time to gather their belongings at the club and say their goodbyes.

As they approached the causeway, she'd pulled off her elf hat and tipped her head back and enjoyed the soothing sensation of being near the water. "I thought you might live in the city."

"I moved out here years ago when my wife got pregnant."

She turned sideways to look at him. How was it she'd never heard that about him?

"Allison and my daughter died in a car accident five Christmases ago." Since the evening had cooled a little, he adjusted the temperature. "We were going to spend the holidays in Houston with her family. She left several days before me. I planned to finish the workweek, then fly out to meet her."

The pain in his voice lanced her heart. What had he been like before the tragedy? "I had no idea." She reached to place her fingers on the back of his hand. "I'm so sorry."

"I haven't coped well."

“I can’t imagine how you would have.”

In the background, the light Christmas jazz spilling from the speakers became more noticeable.

“What about you?”

“Me?” She sank a little deeper into the comfort of the leather seat. “I thought the interrogation was over.”

Even in the dim lighting that surrounded his property, his smile enveloped her. “The more I know about you, the more I want to know.”

She sighed. How much to reveal? Enough to scare him away? “A few years ago, I came back to New Orleans to be closer to my mom because her health was failing.” That didn’t begin to describe the horror of what they’d gone through. And it didn’t give voice to the way they’d held each other and cried through the pain and loss.

He waited while she chose her next words.

“I was engaged. But... I don’t know.” She still didn’t understand his heartlessness. “I guess my mom didn’t die fast enough to suit him. He missed me, demanded I come home. I...”

“There was no way you could make that choice.”

“That’s not how people who are in love behave.” She shook her head. “He asked for his ring back about two months before she passed.”

“He’s an ass.”

She tried to smile. “Thank you. Naturally I think so too.”

“Which is why you don’t put up with bullshit from men now.”

She winced. “I’m sorry for calling you a grinch.”

“You helped me open my eyes. I deserved it.” He turned his hand, taking hers, deepening their emotional connection. “Has this conversation—knowing about my family—changed your mind about this evening?”

“Not at all.” If anything, it had made him more real and vulnerable, and she was starting to fall for him. “Thank you for telling me.”

He pushed the button to kill the car engine. “Wait there.”

After helping her from the vehicle, he grabbed their bags from the back, then took her hand once more to lead her up the garden path. “I’d hate for you to trip on those shoes again.”

“You had to remind me.”

His home had a stunning, two-story entry, and the interior was bright and homey, inviting with fresh flowers and a lived-in look. It was a contradiction to what she expected from a grinchy widower.

“Would you like something to drink? A glass of wine? Champagne, perhaps?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m good. Just... I’m not sure how to say this.”

“Pretend you’re in the interrogation room.”

She grinned. “Uhm, ready to relax?”

“You want to”—he exaggerated a wink—“*Relax.*”

“Exactly.”

At the beginning of the evening, she would have never guessed she’d enjoy his company so much or that his personality would be so complex.

When he'd set down their bags, he brushed her hair back from her temple. "Let me show you around so you're comfortable."

"That would be nice." Not that she'd be able to remember it all unless he provided a map.

The kitchen was stunning with moody blue cabinets and quartz countertops. A gas fireplace was the focal point of the living room. "I love your home."

"Thank you. My sister helped me redecorate. A couple of years ago she decided that she'd had enough of me living in the past and decided it was time for me to move on."

"She sounds wise."

"More than I'd like to admit."

A family picture stood on the mantel, and she reached to touch the frame then pulled her hand away and looked to him for permission. "May I?"

He was still, his eyebrows drawn together pensively, as if concerned about whatever reaction she might have. "Yes."

She lifted the snapshot. It showed him—and presumably Allison and their daughter—on a pristine beach, posed behind a Santa Claus made of sand. The fanciful figure was even wearing a floppy hat.

"All of us worked on that thing for hours, trying to get it just right." His wry smile proved how much the day had meant to him. "It was going to be our family Christmas card. You know, the kind with a long letter inside telling all the things that we'd done that year." He paused once again. "I'd always hated receiving those. But I'm glad she insisted. She captured our last months together and preserved them forever. The

funeral home used this picture on the front of the program they handed out to everyone.”

His story was as sad as it was poignant. “You all look happy.”

“Even though I was frustrated that she insisted on spending so much time making everything perfect.”

His tone said he wished he could have a do-over on his attitude.

“You must miss her terribly.”

“Every damn day. I keep expecting the hurt to loosen its grip.”

“Does it ever?” Her question came from her own grief.

“She was a good person. Someone I didn’t deserve.”

Maddie tipped her head to one side. “I think she was lucky to be loved by you. Judging by the snapshot, she knew it too.” The picture also revealed a different side of him. Loving. Open. Was it still there, buried inside him?

He stalked to her, eased the picture from her grip, then returned it to the mantel. His gray eyes darkened, becoming smoky and a little dangerous. “As charming as that elf outfit is, I’ve been dying to untie that damnable knot in your shirt and yank off those frustratingly tempting shorts.”

She shot him a saucy grin. “What are you waiting for, Sir?”



“The bedroom is upstairs.”

A soft blush painted her cheeks.

“Shall we?” He grabbed their bags and followed her up the curved staircase. That was a mistake.

With every step, she exaggerated her movements. The flex of her calves and the swish of her rear drove him to distraction. “First door on the right.” His voice was gruffer than intended.

He pointed out the bathroom, then took a minute to stow their belongings in the closet.

When he exited, his precious Maddie was perched on the edge of the bed, and he crouched to remove her ridiculous boots and ankle socks. Then he stood and extended a hand to pull her back to her feet.

Now Zander understood the way she’d opened her present. Primal instinct urged him on, and he ached to rip off her clothes, wanting her naked right this instant. Instead he forced himself to take it slow and savor the experience.

He tugged down on her shorts and panties, and she wiggled her hips to help him. All that did was arouse him further.

As she stepped out of them, he dropped to his knees in front of her.

“Gorgeous.” A small well-trimmed patch of hair hid her secrets. And he intended to begin exploring those right this moment. He started by kissing her there.

“Master Zander!”

He glanced up, taking in her wide, unblinking eyes and the shallow rise and fall of her chest. Then he moistened a fingertip and slid it between her labia. As he traced across her clit, she sighed softly.

“A little tender?”

“Maybe a little bit from the flogging.”

“It’s not too swollen.” *Yet. By the end of the night, it would be.*

After a few seconds, she was so damp that his finger slipped effortlessly inside her. “Your pussy muscles are tight.”

Maddie moaned.

“Are you ready for me?” Not that he needed an answer. Her tiny whimpers told him everything he needed to know. But he wanted to hear the words. “I asked you a question, Maddie.”

“Yes.” She curled her fingers into his shoulders.

Earlier she’d confessed that connection. And if he were brutally honest with himself, he’d admit he craved the same thing.

He slid in and out, back and forth, and with each of his motions, her whimpers became more intense. “It doesn’t take much for you to come, does it?”

“Only when I’m with you, Sir.”

Her admission rocked need through him. Suddenly he wanted her climax, needed to hear her screams.

He pulled out to tap her pussy several times. She moaned. Without him asking, she responsively spread her legs for him. Without instructions.

Harder and harder, he spanked her.

“My God!” She clenched, her entire body going rigid.

Wanting to edge her, he stopped what he was doing. But then he immediately licked the swollen area, teasing her with

his tongue, soothing away the ache that he had caused.

Zander reined in his libido, resisting the urge to bury his cock deep inside her feminine heat.

After forcing himself to stop, he stood. “I want to see if you have any marks left over from the flogging.” That was a hopeless lie. While he was curious, he needed a few moments to regain control.

Not surprisingly, she had no marks. But one day, she no doubt would.

The breathtaking thought of a future together shocked him. He’d worked his way through the past three years by focusing only on the present moment.

“I need to come.”

“You will. Many, many times. Be patient.”

“Ugh.” She exhaled a deep, frustration-filled sigh.

“I’d hate to have to give you a spanking for misbehaving.”

“This is annoying.”

“You were warned.” Before she could protest, he swept her off her feet.

“Master Zander!” Frantically she curled against him.

He carried her to a chair and sat, unceremoniously dumping her over his lap.

“Wait!” Her fingers scrabbled against the floor as she tried to find her balance. “I’m sorry. I’ll be patient.” But there was a telltale giggle in her reassurances. “I promise.”

He was having none of it. “Too late.” He alternated quick, heavy spansks with lighter ones on her beautifully rounded

derriere. He interspersed his punishment with light touches, teasing her already swollen femininity.

“I’m sorry.” She panted. “So very, very sorry.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“*Master Zander!*” Her voice was filled with misery.

“No more exasperated sighs, sub.”

“Of course.”

He didn’t have to be able to see her face to know she’d rolled her eyes.

“No, Sir, is what I mean.”

“That’s what I thought.” To be sure his message was clear, he gave her another half dozen good smacks. He was only satisfied when she squealed and tried to wiggle away.

He clapped an arm around her, holding her in place. “Have you learned a lesson?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Should I let you up?”

“That would be your decision, Sir.”

The little minx thrust her well-pinkened ass toward him. And he blazed her buttocks with another dozen swats, giving her the reward she was silently begging for.

“That’s... So...” She gasped, and the scent of her arousal filled his senses.

His cock was turgid with demand.

Maybe she could take some more, but he couldn’t.

He remained sitting but helped her up. “Stay where you are. With your ass on display.”

Her blue eyes were dazed, and her smile was something he'd remember forever. *Fuck*. He liked pleasing her.

She stood before him, her breaths shallow as he unfastened the knot that held her shirt together.

Then he parted the ends and sucked in a sharp breath. Her bra was a demi cup, lifting her rosy nipples toward him. "They're begging for my attention." He removed her bra, then cupped her breasts, gently digging his fingers into the flesh to hold her imprisoned while he leaned over to suck the first nipple into his mouth. He laved it, making it even more distended by pressing it against the roof of his mouth.

Her breathing increased. Moments later she whimpered, so he gave her respite by moving to the other one. When he pulled back, the elongated tips were dusky.

"Make love to me."

Right now, if she asked for the moon, he would find a way to wrap it up and offer it on a silver platter.

He stood and undressed quickly, then drew her toward the bed. Once he'd turned back the covers, he wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her from the ground, placing her on top of the mattress. Quickly he dug through the nightstand drawer for the box of condoms his sister had provided, just in case.

At the time he'd thought she was meddling inappropriately, but now he was grateful for her foresight. This would have been an epically bad time to have to go to the drugstore.

He rolled the protection down his cock as she watched, mouth parted.

"I knew you were big, but I had no idea..."

“I’ll take that as a compliment?”

“Uhm, yes.” She went wide-eyed. “But the size is a little intimidating.”

“We’ll make it work.” He guaranteed it. “I’d like you on top of me.”

She nodded.

His request was more than a little selfish. He wanted access to the nipples he’d left swollen.

Zander took a few minutes to lick her pussy, bringing her back to full arousal.

“I just...” She blew out a breath. “I love that.”

“Not as much as I enjoy tasting you.” He lay next to her, on his back, and offered his hand for support as she straddled him.

She lowered herself, and he guided his cock to her entrance.

Gritting his back teeth, Zander allowed her to set the pace.

With slow, measured strokes, she welcomed him inside.

An agonizing amount of time later, she was fully seated on top of him. He could come in an instant, but he refused to. Instead he sucked in a breath and took back partial control, tormenting her nipples, squeezing them, pinching them.

“Zander...”

“Come for me.”

Again and again, she did, her hair falling around her face and droplets of perspiration glowing on her skin.

She tipped her head back and screamed his name, as he'd imagined.

Was there anything more satisfying?

When she leaned forward, breaths ragged, he shifted their positions until she was on the bottom.

He pinned her arms above her head.

“Take me.”

A million times and more. He made love to her, fucked her, filled her, until it was enough. And yet only the beginning.

Lazily, groggy from sex, they showered together before falling into bed. The perfect little submissive drifted off to sleep with a satisfied smile.

Rest did not come easily to him. Usually he spent hours awake, tormented by the past. But tonight the future called to him. He pictured them together and coming home to her after a long day. Together they'd make new memories. Now he needed to find a way to make his vision a reality and convince her she truly did belong with him.



“Morning.”

Zander opened his eyes to a vision of loveliness standing in the doorway, holding a tray.

She was dressed in the T-shirt he'd worn last night, and it covered her to mid-thigh. Her long, wavy hair hung down her back and framed her face with wild abandon.

What the hell? He pushed up onto his elbows. He was a light sleeper, or had been for years. Maybe last night was the

first time he felt enough peace to relax so deeply.

“I found some stuff in your kitchen.” She brought him a plate of pancakes stacked a mile high, drizzled with syrup and oozing with butter. Several strips of bacon were on a separate plate. In addition to a bowl of strawberries drowned in cream, she’d thoughtfully provided a steaming cup of coffee.

“I think you’re part angel. Either that or I’m still dreaming. That’s it, isn’t it? I’m dreaming.”

She placed the tray on the far side of the bed, then perched next to him on the mattress.

“You’re sharing this, I hope?”

“I had a bowl of cereal downstairs. Healthy bran.” She grimaced.

“There’s more than enough for two.”

“Thanks. I need to get going.”

Belatedly he remembered overhearing that she was going to the shelter today.

“Enjoy.” Her hips, swaying invitingly, she walked into his closet and returned a couple of minutes later wearing jeans and a T shirt.

“You need to leave right away?”

“I’m already running a little late.”

Yet she’d taken the time to make him a breakfast fit for royalty. “Let me drive you.”

“There’s no need. I already ordered a car.”

“Where’s the shelter?”

“Downtown.”

“That’ll cost a fortune.”

“Good thing I don’t have a lot of bills.”

He set down his coffee cup with a thud and threw back the covers. “I insist.”

Her eyes went wide as she stared at his erection. “Is that for me?”

Damn, her demeanor was so refreshing. He wanted to bury himself in her and keep her forever. “It is. Every inch.”

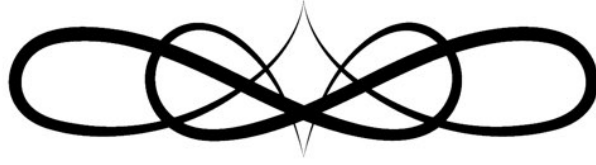
“You’ll think of me today.” Her cell phone chimed. “That’s my ride.”

“Cancel it.”

“Thank you for the offer. It means a lot.” Rather than arguing, she walked to the doorway. When she was there, she looked back and blew him a kiss.

Then she was gone, the memory of her trailing behind her.

CHAPTER SIX



“I see you hiding back there, Maddie! I’m not letting you off the hook.”

She glanced over her shoulder and grinned at Theresa, another of the shelter’s volunteers. “You’ll be fine without me.”

“Nope. Not happening. Everyone’s waiting for you.”

Reluctantly she removed her apron and dropped it into the laundry bag. They’d spent hours preparing and serving an enormous meal, and she’d loved every moment.

After her mother passed, she’d been adrift. One Sunday, Kaylee had invited her to help serve dinner at the shelter. Because she had nothing else to do and was tired of her own company, she agreed.

At the end of the evening, she was tired but also satisfied, as if she were useful once again. She’d connected, heart-to-heart, with some of the clients and had made plenty of friends.

The next week, she’d come back. Eventually it became something she looked forward to. It wasn’t simply something to do; it became part of her healing.

Today they had a large turnout, and not unexpectedly as the director was throwing a massive Christmas party, complete

with festivities.

And if the way Theresa folded her arms across her chest was any indication, Maddie would be part of it, whether she wanted to or not.

“They’re waiting for us.”

“I’m ready.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

With a laugh, she followed Theresa to the corner of the room to join the other food service volunteers in front of the tree.

“You know I can’t sing, right?” she warned everyone.

Several people laughed.

The man on her right side offered her a piece of paper with the words on it.

“I thought I was going to have to hum along.”

“Shall we?” Theresa asked.

One person started. “*We wish you a merry Christmas, we wish you a merry Christmas...*”

Maddie and her group joined in, almost everyone off-key. By the time they reached the end, even the clients were swaying back and forth, clapping and singing boisterously.

Grinning stupidly she and the people standing next to her bowed before hurrying away.

A group of Irish dancers was up next, and they announced they’d be performing a traditional jig.

Back in the kitchen, Theresa made an announcement. “I could go for a peppermint hot chocolate.”

“So could I!” someone else shouted.

Conversation buzzed around her as she gathered her purse.

Maddie was exhausted. She’d worked all day, and she’d spent half the night having hot sex with Master Zander.

Leaving him this morning had broken her heart. The truth was, saying goodbye to him was never going to be easy, so it was better that she left when she did.

When they scened at the club, she’d been desperate for a connection with him, but now, in hindsight, going home with him had been a terrible idea. The magic they’d shared had been more than physical; it had nourished her emotions.

Why had she offered so much to a man she’d probably never see again? And now the emptiness of her life was even more painful.

“How about you, Maddie?”

At the sound of her name, she looked up. “Sorry?”

“You coming with us?”

She nodded, eager to put off going home for as long as possible.

Twenty minutes later, the group of women arrived at the nearby coffee shop, and she ordered the largest caramel macchiato on the menu. It had so many calories it counted as dinner. Tonight, maybe she’d soak in a hot bath, then curl up and watch a holiday baking competition on television.

“I bought this to share.” Theresa carried over a box containing a gingerbread loaf and offered it to Maddie.

Warring with herself, she wrinkled her nose. “I shouldn’t.”

“It’s the holidays.” Theresa nudged the box closer. “Start your diet next year. That’s what New Year’s resolutions are for.”

Maddie laughed. “You convinced me.” She compromised, breaking a piece in half. Then she quickly slid the treats to the woman next to her.

After taking a bite, she blinked. Combined with her sweet beverage, she’d just had enough sugar to melt the enamel off her teeth.

The small group took turns sharing their holiday plans.

When it came time for her to say something, Maddie’s smile froze. “I think I’ll just spend a quiet day.”

Theresa scowled. “Nope. Not happening. You can come to my house.”

“That’s beyond kind. Thank you.” She appreciated the invitation but didn’t commit, one way or another.

“Text me later if you want me to set an extra plate. The more the merrier.”

“I appreciate that. Really.”

A few minutes later, all conversation at the table paused, and people seemed fixated on her.

Theresa, wide-eyed, pointed over her shoulder. “I think you’ve got company.”

Pulse slowing, Maddie turned.

In all his masculine glory, Master Zander stood there, dressed in a black T-shirt and tight, sexy jeans. He was freshly shaven and smelled of Dominant intent.

She tried to speak, but no words emerged on the first attempt.

After greeting everyone at the table, he leaned down so that no one could overhear the words that were meant just for her.

“I’ve come to collect my precious little sub.”

“I…” She shook her head. “I don’t understand.” A million questions tumbled through her mind. How did he know where to find her?

“Will you trust me?”

She did. Completely.

When she nodded, he pulled back her chair, then addressed the silent spectators. “Ladies. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“Merry Christmas!” Theresa called, grinning.

“Merry Christmas,” Maddie called back as confused as she was delighted.

Minutes later she was once again seated in his car. “This is becoming a habit.”

“Yeah.” He slid a grin in her direction before starting the engine. “It is.”

“I’m not sure what to say. How did you know where to find me?”

“I have my ways.”

“And I want to know them.”

“I called Kaylee. I remembered you telling her you were going to the shelter. If you’re going to be mad at someone, be mad at me. I promised her I’d take the heat.”

“But I was at the coffee shop.”

“Others were talking about maybe coming over.”

Part of her appreciated his efforts. “I’ll forgive you if you tell me where we’re going.”

“Your place. If you’re willing to give me the address.”

At least this saved her from needing to call another ride service. “I’m in Kenner. A small house that I inherited from my mom.” She gave him the address, and he programmed it into his phone.

On the drive, she told him all about the day including the fun singalong she’d participated in. When he slid to a stop in front of her home, she turned to him. “Thank you for the ride.”

“I have a little something for you.”

“Zander...”

He didn’t waste his time arguing with her. “Open the front door for me, will you?”

The man was a force to be reckoned with.

He opened the rear of the SUV, and it was filled with two boxes.

What? “Can I give you a hand?”

“I’m a big, strong man.”

“A big, strong, stubborn man,” she muttered.

“What?” He slowly turned to stare at her.

Twin arrows of desire and fear shot through her. “Nothing. *Sir.*”

“That’s what I thought. Let’s get this stuff inside.”

Swept away in the storm he created, she hurried up the walkway to open the front door, and he followed her inside, carrying the largest box, made from Styrofoam.

“This needs to go in the kitchen.”

Her home was long and narrow, so the kitchen was visible from the living room. She walked in front of him to sweep a pile of mail to the side.

The moment he set it down, she looked at him. “Can I open it?”

“No. Patience, remember?”

“Not my strong suit, remember?”

He went back to the car and returned with a second box. Then he closed and locked the front door.

“I’m so confused.”

He placed the box down before he backed her against the counter. With purposeful intent, he captured her mouth in a long, searing kiss.

She melted into him, needing exactly this...him.

His hard cock pressed into the softness of her belly, and she couldn’t imagine anything being more perfect.

“Merry Christmas, Maddie.”

“I’m still confused.”

“Open that box first.”

She wriggled from his grasp.

“Here.” He pulled out a pocketknife and flipped open the blade before handing her the hilt.

Eagerly she slit the tape.

She parted the flaps to reveal a small but gorgeous potted Christmas tree decorated with ornaments and lights. And of course, there was a grinch-like character on top. “Zander! This is perfect.”

“It’s a live tree. I know how you like taking care of things, so I figured a fake one would never do.”

Had a man ever known her this well?

“Now the next one.”

She shook her head. “This is more than sufficient. You didn’t need to do anything.”

“I believe I gave you a command.”

The authority in his tone shot a thrill through her.

“You just pull the top off this one.”

She removed it, and the scent of warm turkey and mashed potatoes wafted into the air.

Zander relaxed his hips against the stove. “You’re taking care of others. I wanted to do this for you.”

The box was filled with all her favorites, including banana cream pie. “This is wonderful, but I don’t understand.” Or rather, was afraid to believe.

“This morning, I wondered how I’d gotten so lucky. I experienced great love once, and now I’ve met a woman with the biggest heart I’ve ever known. Big enough, even, to remind me I had one.”

A lump formed in her throat.

“After you left, the house was empty. Echoing with loneliness. And I realized I no longer wanted to face a lifetime of Christmases alone.”

Tears spilled from her eyes. “Zander...”

“That connection you spoke of? I want it, every bit as much as you do. I love you, Maddie. I want us to create a future together.”

“I love you, Zander.” She launched herself into his arms, and he was there for her, kissing her, supporting her, protecting her. “Will the food keep warm, Sir?”

“For a couple of hours at least.” A wicked gleam in his gray eyes, he swung her from the ground and tossed her over his shoulder, giving her rear a smarting smack. “We’re going to have a very merry Christmas and begin our New Year filled with happiness. What do you think of that, my precious sub?”

She giggled. “Yes, Sir. Let’s get started on forever.”



QUARTER
HOLIDAYS
TITANS

HIS CHRISTMAS
Wish

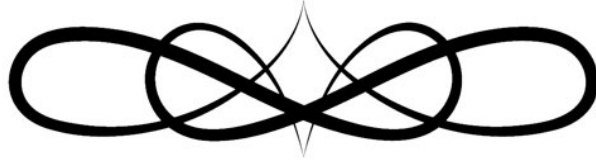
NEW ORLEANS BILLIONAIRES: HOLIDAY EDITION

SIERRA
CARTWRIGHT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

For everyone who believes in the magic of the holidays.

CHAPTER ONE



For the seventh time in less than ten minutes, Hayes McCall's phone vibrated, slithering across his desktop. Because he always held out hope his five-year-old son would be calling, he checked the display.

Mistress Aviana. Owner of New Orleans's renowned BDSM club, the Quarter.

Again.

The woman was as demanding as she was persistent. Which was how she'd gotten as far as she had in life, despite a horrible start.

Biting back an annoyed sigh, he sent her to voicemail and returned his attention to one of his computer screens.

Less than sixty seconds later, the device started its annoying dance once again. *Jesus.* Why the hell wouldn't she leave him alone to wallow in misery?

Deciding to get this over with, he finally answered. "Aviana. What do you want?"

"Merry Christmas to you too, Hayes."

Once upon a time, he would have automatically returned the greeting. Now, the bah-humbug holidays were an awful reminder of everything he'd lost.

Seeming not to care that he didn't respond, she went on in her obnoxiously cheerful tone. "I'm expecting to see you this evening."

At her club's annual Christmas extravaganza. "No, you're not." They both knew he hadn't RSVP'd.

"It's been too long."

Months. Maybe years. More than anyone, she understood the reasons why. Aviana was one of the few people who knew the depth of his ex's deception.

"If you want to drown in a bottle of bourbon on Christmas day, fine. I won't say anything."

"Good of you."

"But tonight? No. I have a surprise that I don't want you to miss." She paused for a moment. "Oh, Hayes? Bring a gift for Santa's bag. And don't be a cheap bastard. Original Scrooge."

"Piss off, Aviana."

They'd been friends for too long for his words to have much, if any, effect.

"Stop sitting on your ass feeling sorry for yourself." In her usual straightforward way, she went on without waiting for his protest. "Getting out will be good for you. Socialize a little. I've been planning this event all year." Switching to a more dictatorial tone, she issued one of her infamous royal decrees. "I have a ring that needs to be kissed."

Annoyed as hell, he fired back. "And I have an ass that needs the same thing."

She hung up on him.

“Fuck.” He despised people who thought they knew what he needed better than he did.

Yet a reluctant, nagging part of him wondered if she had a point.

A few years ago, he’d enjoyed everything about the holidays. And why not? He finally had everything he wanted: a wife and a son, a family of his own.

Watching Trenton marvel at holiday parades and seeing Santa arrive filled Hayes with joy. Happily he’d piled everyone into the car to drive to Galveston for its annual festival of lights. They’d stroll along the meandering paths, sipping hot chocolate as they listened to carolers and marveled at the animated displays.

Life didn’t get better.

This year?

His ex-wife and son were spending the holidays in Aspen with her new boyfriend.

All of a sudden, the most wonderful time of the year had become his worst nightmare.

He’d rather brood. Instead, Aviana wanted him to waltz into her club so he could pay homage to her and her reign?

Ho, ho, fucking ho.



“Are you sure you can manage by yourself?”

Before answering her best friend, Abigail glanced around at the other vendors setting up for this evening’s holiday

bazaar at the Quarter. Most booths had two or more people staffing them. But she would be handling this one alone.

Digging deep for a heap of confidence she was nowhere close to feeling, Abigail smiled sunnily. “Piece of cake.”

Raven tilted her head to the side and studied Abigail hard. “Oh, Abigail. You’re a terrible liar. You’re nervous as hell.”

“You got me.” Abigail laughed—well, as much as she could in the tight-fitting corset that Raven had cinched her into.

Raven worried her lower lip. “I think I should cancel the downtown event.”

Even though Abigail shook her head, Raven had reason to be concerned.

She owned a corset store, and during the holidays she also set up stalls at festivals and fairs. Because Christmas was just around the corner, she was busier than normal.

Abigail had agreed to be an assistant for Raven’s store manager while Raven handled another event. Yesterday the manager had come down with a terrible cold, leaving Abigail by herself. Though she’d helped Raven before, Abigail had never done this alone. “I’ll manage.” After all, she spent her days teaching preschoolers. That had definitely prepared her for an evening of chaos. “How hard can it be?”

“I think you’re about to find out.”

Raven had already spent much longer than she’d planned helping with setup. They’d draped garland everywhere, including over the shop’s sign. Then for a festive flair, they’d hung mistletoe over the entrance. Finally Raven had plugged in bright lights to attract attention, but nothing happened.

Troubleshooting had required twenty minutes and assistance from the club's lead AV technician.

“Go.” Abigail pointed toward the dungeon's exit.

Stubbornly Raven looked over her shoulder. “The cashbox is—”

“Stocked with money and emergency credit card slips.” Abigail grinned. “You've been over this already.”

With a skeptical sigh, Raven checked her watch. “I owe you...big time.” Then she hurried away.

Because the club wasn't yet open to attendees, Abigail checked out the other vendors. Their wares were impressive. Sexy clothing suitable for the club, candles for hot wax play, hand-crafted paddles and whips, collars, all kinds of plugs, and a wild array of vibrators.

A shop offering stained glass intrigued her, and the combination of bright lights and festive colors beckoned her into the booth. One large suncatcher ensnared her. The piece was of a woman—her expression serene and surrendered—suspended in bondage. Though the price was outside her budget, looking at the artwork would bring Abigail joy every day.

“Shall I wrap it up for you?”

“Thank you. Yes.” *Merry Christmas to me.*

Purchase in hand, she continued on, admiring the spanking benches and other pieces of fetish furniture.

Once she'd looked at all the choices, she returned to her own stall.

The event's volunteers began to arrive to change into their elf costumes. From what she'd heard, the evening would be a

spectacle. The club's owner, Mistress Aviana, had surprises she hadn't shared with anyone.

The only thing Abigail knew for sure was that there would be a grand parade, complete with Santa, and all activities would be suspended for an hour. That would be the only time she could take a break.

For the next few minutes, Abigail straightened clothes that were already perfectly displayed. Then, still battling her jitters, she dug her purse out from beneath the table and grabbed her lipstick and was using the mirror when her fellow submissive and friend, Maddie, came into view.

As Abigail turned, Maddie's jaw dropped.

"Oh my God. You look sensational."

Unable to help herself, Abigail smiled. "This outfit's my new favorite." Tonight, she'd opted for steampunk, and she'd complemented her black overbust corset with a bustled purple-brocade skirt that trailed behind her. The front, however, was short, stopping at her upper thigh. It covered what it needed to, but not much more. She'd completed her look with a gadget-laden hat and Victorian style boots.

"You make me want to buy one."

"I'll give you the friends-and-family discount."

They exchanged hugs before Maddie hurried off, leaving Abigail alone again.

Soon after, members began to arrive. Some were in clothing they might choose for a nice dinner, while others selected festive garb. Most, however, had opted for fetish gear.

People watching was always her favorite part of attending events at the Quarter.

From where she was positioned, she had a good view of the frosted-glass door that separated the dungeon from the reception area. For now, at least, she could see everyone, including Santa.

In shock, she blinked.

Evan Frost was playing the Jolly One?

Surely there wasn't a worse choice. Not only was he her friend's boss, but she heard stories at least once a week of the numerous ways he was an asshole. He was as demanding as he was uncompromising. Kaylee almost always worked twelve-hour days, including Saturdays. If she was lucky, her phone didn't ring on Sunday with one of his summons.

They sometimes joked that he was well named. Frost wasn't just his last name; it also described his personality. Having him play Saint Nick must have been Mistress Aviana's idea of a hearty holiday joke.

Even though she was far from his biggest fan, Abigail had to admit to sneaking a peek at his six-pack abs. This Santa didn't have a great big belly. Or a shirt on for that matter.

A couple of young women entered the booth, and Abigail went to help them. Before long, she was swept away, chatting, taking measurements, and helping them find the correct sizes.

Their happiness as she tied laces made her nervousness vanish.

Maybe because of the festive atmosphere and because they knew this wasn't Abigail's usual job, people were friendly and didn't mind waiting for her to help them.

The first sales were tricky as she figured out how to process the transactions. But by nine o'clock, she had it down to a science.

Another couple arrived, and she smiled as she turned to help them.

“My sub has been looking for a corset, and I’d like to buy her one for Christmas.”

“Fabulous. Any idea what you’re looking for? Overbust? Under?” Abigail pointed out examples of their displayed bustiers and also showed them several waspies.

The sub looked to her Dominant for guidance.

He seemed to know exactly what he wanted. “Underbust. Elegant. Something she can wear over a dress or blouse with a pair of jeans. But when we’re in private, the piece will leave her breasts bare.”

The submissive sucked in a tiny breath.

For a moment, Abigail was lost in her own thoughts. How long had it been since she had a Dominant who shopped for her and erotically teased her?

More years than she could count.

On occasion, she scened with Dominants here at the club. Yet she would never consider playing with the same man twice, and she’d refused a couple of offers to date. She missed having an intimate connection with a Dominant but not enough to risk offering her heart and soul a second time.

Realizing the couple was looking at her, she blinked to refocus. “Black is always a good choice. Elegant, as you say. Chic. Goes with anything.”

“May I try one?”

“Absolutely.” Abigail took the woman’s measurements, then pulled out a couple of choices.

The submissive went straight for the black satin with rhinestones. Her Dominant nodded his approval.

“Can I help you with that?” Abigail offered.

The Dominant responded on the woman’s behalf. “I’ve got it.”

As he laced her into it, Abigail’s friend Kaylee stopped by the booth. Her frown was at odds with her fun, quirky elf hat.

“Did you hear?” Kaylee demanded.

“No.” Abigail frowned. Kaylee’s breathing was sharp, showing her agitation. “What’s the matter?”

“Asshole Frost is filling-in as Santa. And I’m his helper.”

“Oh no. That has to be a nightmare.” She scowled on her friend’s behalf. “Can you get someone else to do it?”

“I would, except...” She blew out a breath. “He knows how much I want to go to my sister’s wedding. So he promised me the time off, with pay. And he bought me the plane ticket. First class.”

“He’s still an asshole.” Abigail meant it.

“He knows my weak spots.”

The man was a master manipulator. As Kaylee often said, Machiavelli had nothing on Evan Frost. “Let’s go have a drink after Christmas and talk about him.”

“I’m in.” For the first time, Kaylee smiled. “Anyway, I need to meet up with the jerk so we can get Santa’s bag ready.” With a quick wave, she headed down the hallway.

Mistress Aviana had requested that all attendees bring a gift, which Frost would hand out after the parade.

Abigail returned her attention to her customers. The submissive tried on almost every item they had in her size. In the end, the Dom bought three different corsets: black, white, and red. Perfect for any occasion.

As soon as Abigail was finished helping the couple, two ladies decided to buy skirts that they could wear to the following year's renaissance festival.

She wrapped their selections in tissue paper and placed them in pretty handle bags.

At that moment, Master Hayes McCall pushed through the frosted glass door leading into the club. Her heart skipped its next few beats only to gallop frantically a moment later. Wearing a dark suit coat and white dress shirt that was unbuttoned at the throat, he was devastatingly handsome.

Before tonight she hadn't realized how broad he was. Or how good looking. His hair was a little unkempt, and an untamed lock fell across his forehead.

Even across the distance, his green eyes seized her attention. Heavens above. He totally overwhelmed her.

Before they left the booth, one of the women whispered, "Mercy! That man is my Christmas wish."

In another time and place, Abigail might have agreed with them.

Hayes paused, and their gazes connected.

Submissive heat collided inside her, making her knees wobble.

Then—*God no*—he started to walk in her direction.

She told herself he could continue past her on the way to visit a different vendor.

But then he stopped right in front of her.

She needed to say something. Instead, she stood there, frozen in place.

“Hello. Abigail, is it?”

Where was her voice? Instead of replying, she settled for nodding. How did he know her name?

“I need a gift.”

Of course he did. She knew about his awful divorce, but with his devastating good looks and obscene amount of money, it made sense that he had found someone new.

“You can help me, right?” He glanced around. “Or is there someone else I need to talk to?”

Finally recovering, she cleared her throat. “Yes.” *Sir*. “Do you have an idea of what type of corset you may be looking for?”

“Something...” He took a step inside the booth, bringing them closer together.

Instead of surveying the inventory, he stopped right in front of her. Even wearing heels, she had to tip back her head to look at him. She ended up moving so quickly that her hat fell off and crashed to the hardwood floor.

Right away, she crouched, but he beat her to it. Suddenly they were a scant few inches apart.

Abigail inhaled his scent, crisp, laced with confidence and underlaid with an intoxicating masculine musk. Her pulse skittered, and she couldn't draw a breath. No man had ever affected her so powerfully and completely.

“I can’t resist a lady in distress.” He stood and offered a hand.

As unsteady as she was, she needed the assistance.

She slipped her hand into his much larger one. His grip both reassuring and dangerous to her equilibrium, he helped her up. “Gallant.” To save herself, Abigail needed distance. Though it was suddenly the last thing she wanted, she took a step back.

“Allow me.” He returned the hat to its rightful spot, angling it a bit, the way she’d been wearing it.

Had he missed nothing about her?

“Thank you.” To cover her nerves, she smoothed the front of her skirt and retreated behind a cloak of professionalism. “Are you looking for something specific?”

“Perhaps you could show me a few things?”

Was he being intentionally difficult? “Is there a budget we need to be respectful of?”

“That’s the last consideration.”

Good thing, as most of Raven’s stock was handmade and the prices reflected the exquisite craftsmanship. “Any particular type?”

“I’m afraid I’m out of my element.”

Abigail doubted that.

He walked past her to study the display pieces, and he asked about the benefits of each type.

All night, she’d answered similar questions without a hint of embarrassment. But none of her customers had been as deeply sensual as Master Hayes.

“And you’re wearing an overbust?”

“That’s correct.”

“It’s your preference?”

“To be honest, I have every different type of corset. They’re a weakness.” She shrugged. “A lady can never have enough purses, pairs of shoes, or too much lingerie.”

“I tend to agree.” He picked out a tiny waspie.

“Do you have your lady’s measurements?”

Leisurely he swept his gaze down her body, heating her once again. “She’s about your size.”

“In that case, this might work better.” She sought out a garment that was slightly smaller, then offered it to him.

Handing back the other, he asked, “Do you mind showing me?”

“I... What?”

“Hold it up in front of you so I can get an idea of how it might look?”

The request was a little unusual, but nothing about this exchange had been ordinary.

“In front of the mirror.”

Was that a suggestion? The tiny bite of steel in his tone made it more of a Dominant demand. All her instincts urged her to obey, even though she didn’t have to.

She accepted the waspie from him, then crossed to the mirror to hold up the tiny corset.

Hayes moved in behind her.

Trying to find her emotional footing, she swallowed deeply and began her practiced sales pitch. “A waspie makes the wearer’s waist really tiny, if that’s the aim.”

“It’s gorgeous.”

Even the reflection of his eyes held power over her. For a wicked, wild moment, she allowed her imagination to soar, imagining what this moment might be like if she actually were his submissive.

Then she reminded herself she was helping him shop for a present, nothing more.

“And what else do you have?”

To break the spell he’d woven over her, she glanced away.

For a minute or so, she perused the racks and chose a couple more things he might like.

As before, he asked her to model them for him.

“Which is your favorite?”

“The white satin Victorian.” She held it in front of her. This one had been on her wish list for almost a year, and it was among the most expensive items they had available. “The sweetheart neckline is exquisite. And the corset itself has twelve bones, all perfectly spaced for stability, and the front metal busk is very artistic. The panel on the back is six inches for proper privacy.”

Over her shoulder, his shockingly deep green eyes darkened.

“Shall I wrap it up for you?”

“Please do.”

“In case it’s not perfect, it can be exchanged as long as it hasn’t been worn.”

“I have no doubt it will be appreciated.”

She was certain of the same thing. Several people had considered the piece only to put it back after seeing the price tag.

Careful not to allow their bodies to touch, Abigail slipped past him.

Master Hayes pulled out his wallet. “Do you have gift cards available?”

“Of course. In any denomination.”

“Three hundred dollars.”

Generous.

After she ran his card, he asked her to wrap the corset and gift card separately.

She took her time making sure the presentation of both was beautiful. “I hope these are perfect.”

“I have no doubt.” He accepted his purchases, and their fingers touched, reigniting the attraction she’d been trying to tamp down.

Then, shocking her, he placed the bigger of the two bags on top of the table. “This one is for you.”

“I...” She blinked. “I don’t understand.” *For me?*

“You were meant to have that corset. The joy on your face when you talked about it...?”

Oh no. “I can’t possibly accept.”

“Then you can exchange it for something else that you want more.”

“Mr. McCall—”

“There is no woman in my life, Abigail. And I haven’t scened in years.”

Holy...

His words were pointed—part invitation, part information.

Leaving her speechless, he strode away. Stunned, she watched him go and was shocked when he added the second present to Santa’s gift pile before heading into the dungeon.

Her breaths were so jagged that her corset felt tighter than it had all night.

The last ten minutes couldn’t possibly have happened.

She stood there, her world rocked, while activity buzzed around her.

Finally a new potential customer arrived, grabbing her attention and forcing her to focus on something other than the mysterious Dominant.

A few minutes later, a dungeon master walked down the hallway calling out a reminder that the fair needed to be closed by 11:45.

“That means the walkways must be clear. So start wrapping up now. After the parade, the Christmas tree will be lit, and you can reopen. However, Mistress Aviana has also cordially invited you to stop by her throne first.”

The seriousness in his deep baritone voice conveyed that the owner had issued a royal proclamation.

After finishing up with her customer, Abigail tucked the cashbox beneath one of the displays, then straightened the checkout table before loosening the ties that held back the booth's vinyl flaps.

Last year, after she and Raven had closed up for the Christmas tree lighting, they had headed deeper into the dungeon to secure a prime spot to watch the festivities.

But Hayes had gone that way, and Abigail didn't dare risk running into him again.

The ending of her last relationship had left her shattered. When she and Kevin had started talking about getting married, he'd made one thing clear: he already had three kids and didn't want more.

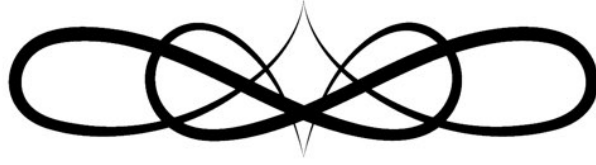
When she tried to talk about her dreams for a large family, he blew up and moved out of the house they shared—one she couldn't pay for on her salary.

His callousness destroyed her.

To go from the life she'd imagined to being alone again had broken her heart. All this time later, she was still trying to mend the pieces.

Which meant there was absolutely zero chance of her submitting to a man like Master Hayes McCall. No matter how tempting he might be.

CHAPTER TWO



What in the actual fuck?

Once he was inside the dungeon with its thumping techno Christmas music and buzz of excitement, Hayes shook his head to clear it.

This evening, he'd walked through the Quarter's nondescript green front door as late as possible. He'd intended to pay his respects—such as they were—to Aviana and then go the hell home.

But then the sight of the lovely Abigail stopped him in his tracks.

His visits to the club were rare, and he'd seen her a handful of times. As far as he recalled, she'd been with friends but not a Dominant.

Hayes had taken a moment to glance at her ring finger, her wrist, and neck for some sort of collar or other indication that she belonged to someone. If so, he'd have respected the boundaries.

Or so he told himself.

Her long, dark, luxurious hair invited his fantasies, but even from a distance, her luminous blue eyes held a wariness that sparked his protective instincts.

As he drew closer, he noted that her sassy steampunk style was a playful contradiction to her expression. The corset cinched her waist to a whisp. And while the back of her skirt trailed behind her on the floor, the front of it barely covered her feminine secrets. Factor in her sexy Victorian boots, and he couldn't believe every man in the club wasn't lined up to buy from her.

As they talked and interacted, he realized his earlier thought process had been utter bullshit. There might be a code of honor and respect among Dominants, but even if she had been spoken for, it wouldn't have stopped his interest.

Hayes wanted Abigail and was determined to have her.

He moved deeper into the dungeon and paused for a moment to watch a submissive being flogged on a Saint Andrew's cross.

When he arrived at the club, his bitterness had left him with no appetite for playing with anyone. Now he was obsessed with having Abigail on her knees, sweetly surrendering to him.

Dungeon monitors walked through the club to let people know that their scenes had to end so walkways would be clear for the upcoming festivities.

He caught sight of his friend Zander, a man who despised the holiday season as much as Hayes did. Last year, they'd commiserated together over some fine Bonds whiskey.

No doubt, Aviana had leaned on the other man to show up tonight, much as she had with Hayes.

He joined his friend, and they shook hands before moving to a place near the wall to get out of the way.

"You planning to watch the parade?" Zander asked.

“Hell, no.” Despite his sudden improved mood, Aviana’s theatrics didn’t appeal. “Heading to the bar. Don’t have a lot of tolerance for all this Christmas crap. Ho, ho, fucking ho.” Not only had Susanna destroyed their family and stolen away his son, but she’d managed to get fifty percent of his bank account on the way out the door. “Open your wallet a little wider and smile while you do it.” His unwanted divorce had broken his heart and left him jaded.

“Got a business meeting in town Thursday,” Zander said. “Thinking of grabbing a drink at the Maison Sterling before heading back.”

“The ex gets Trenton this year, and she’s taking him to Aspen.” He scowled. No doubt his alimony money was funding her little getaway and all her shopping excursions. “Shoot me a text with the time; I’ll be there.”

After they parted ways, Hayes headed to the bar—not that it would be the usual experience. When he checked in, he’d been informed that no alcohol would be served this evening. Generally drinks were allowed if the member wasn’t scening, or after they’d finished. Good rule, one he supported. But tonight, he wanted to enjoy a fine distillate.

He entered the crowded area. Aviana had decorated in a way that celebrated New Orleans, rife with Mardi Gras beads, artwork of historical landmarks and street scenes, LSU pendants, autographed football jerseys, and hurricane glasses. In a nod to the season, she’d added unnecessary lights and garland. Oversize ornaments dangled from shelves and hung from the ceiling. He was tall enough that he was forced to pay attention so their ridiculousness didn’t smack him in the head.

Then he saw Abigail at a round, bar-high table, facing a window where she could watch comings and goings in the

dungeon.

His mood suddenly improved.

Without stopping to think, he made his way through the patrons to reach her side. Before sliding onto the chair next to her, he paused. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Eyes wide, her breath catching, she turned to him.

In that instant he knew she was as attracted to him as he was to her. And she didn’t seem pleased about it.

Still, after a brief hesitation, she offered a half smile. “Does that line actually work for you?”

Hayes shrugged. “Never tried it before.”

In skepticism, she raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“I promise.” After meeting Susanna, he hadn’t needed to approach a woman. And since she exited his life, he’d had no interest in the fairer sex. “Pickup lines aren’t my thing.” He grinned. “Until I couldn’t think of what else to say.”

Their gazes met. And the color of her eyes lightened as her expression softened.

Maybe his honesty had disarmed her.

“In that case, yes. Thank you. I’d appreciate that since the waitstaff is swamped.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Maybe something with caffeine? Coffee if they have it. Or a cola. I could use a little energy.”

Stupidly happy that she hadn’t blown him off and sent him away, he threaded his way back through the crowd to reach the bar. The woman suggested a cappuccino, light milk with a

strong coffee flavor. Since that sounded perfect, he ordered two.

Hayes slid one cup and saucer—complete with some sort of tiny, weird-shaped biscuit—in front of her. Her genuine smile of gratitude began to bring him back to life.

“This is a tiny bit of heaven. You have no idea how much I appreciate this. Thank you.”

He’d become so accustomed to complying with Susanna’s petty demands that he’d forgotten what it was like to genuinely want to please a woman.

“I love biscotti.”

He frowned.

She picked up the cookie-like treat.

“That’s what it’s called? Looks dry as a bone.” He picked up his and banged it on the side of his saucer.

“It is. Which makes it perfect to dip in a cup of coffee.”

Who knew?

“This is cranberry and orange. A classic Christmas pairing.”

He’d never thought of the holidays as having their own flavor profile. Except for fruit cake. And that was a regrettable one, to be sure.

“You don’t spend much time in the kitchen?”

“Afraid not. You?”

“I love cooking. Baking, specifically. Cookies are my thing. I make them every week, and at the holidays I’m afraid I’m a little out of control.”

Hayes could listen to her talk all day. Maybe it was because he was so accustomed to a certain type of woman, but he adored how down-to-earth she was. Her realness fed a part of him that he hadn't realized was empty. He wanted to know more, so he encouraged her to go on. "Are you?"

"I bake for all my neighbors and coworkers." She wrinkled her nose. "And then I take some to the shelter where my friend Maddie volunteers. My biggest downfall is that I tend to sample every batch. You know, just to be sure I got the ingredients right."

That wasn't apparent to him.

"Which may be one of the reasons I love corsets."

"I appreciate curves."

"Well... In that case—" Flushing, she broke off her sentence.

Now he'd never know what she might have admitted.

She tried to hide from him by dunking the end of her biscotti into her coffee. "This is wonderful."

"I'm glad it makes you happy."

"Let me pay you back. I can send you money on an app."

"Your pleasure"—*and your softly sensual sigh*—"is all the thanks I require." Then, because she seemed to appreciate him being transparent, he continued in that vein. "It's been a while since I spent time with a lady."

"Has it?"

There was interest in her question but no shock. Seemed his reputation preceded him. Not a surprise. His messy divorce had kept the local gossip columnists busy. Susanna had been

strategic in trying to sway public opinion of him by constantly dripping information, some of it scandalous, to the hungry vultures.

This time Abigail unflinchingly met his gaze. “Just for the record, from what I’ve seen, you’re not a scrooge.”

He winced. Until now, he hadn’t given a single fuck what had been said about him. “I’m beginning to think everyone in the Crescent City read that article.”

“There were a lot of clicks and shares.”

“The word paints an instant picture, doesn’t it?”

“Scrooge? As in a stingy old man?” She broke off another piece of cookie, but she held it, rather than dipping it. And she seemed to be struggling to hold back a grin. “As I recall, he was wearing a white nightshirt. Very skinny legs.”

He shuddered. “Perish the thought.”

When she went on, her tone was more serious. “But there’s a more important lesson from *A Christmas Carol*, isn’t there?”

“How so?” He picked up the thread of her question. “I’ve never read the book.”

“Or seen the play?”

Enthralled with her, he shut out the rest of the world. “No.”

“It’s a classic. We should watch the movie. I mean—” She picked up her beverage and took a sip. “*You* should. The message is a good one.”

“Enlighten me?”

“Are you serious?”

He nodded.

“Ebenezer Scrooge is a miser, and he has a full character arc into redemption.”

“So there is hope?”

She lifted one of her creamy, bare shoulders, and he couldn't look away. “He's visited by three ghosts—of Christmas past, present, and future—and his character evolves because of what he's shown.”

“You were right the first time. We should watch the movie together.” For a moment, he recalled holidays he, Trenton, and Susanna had made popcorn and snuggled together on the couch in front of the TV.

Those happy times had made her announcement that they were getting a divorce stunning.

In retrospect, he had to admit she'd played her hand—and him—masterfully.

Quietly Abigail continued to regard him, and her interest jolted him from another of his miserable trips into the past, where he ruminated over events he couldn't change.

Had he missed her response to his suggestion? Or had she assumed it was a throw-away comment? “I mean it about the movie.”

Interest flared in her blue eyes. Just as quickly, caution extinguished it.

“Mr. McCall...”

The rest of her sentence was stolen away when the overhead lights flickered before dimming. All conversation came to an immediate halt, and the thumping music stopped, plunging the dungeon into silence.

He and Abigail exchanged glances.

“I heard that Mistress Aviana had a surprise this evening.”

So she'd said when they'd talked.

“Her events are always interesting.”

They both turned in their seats to have a better view of the club beyond them. Almost immediately, large monitors descended from the ceiling, and the cry of a trumpet blasted through the air.

“Hear ye; hear ye!” The camera panned to the stairs, then up to the landing where the crier stood.

Before his marriage, Hayes had visited the Quarter's private rooms on the second floor. On his way down, he'd frequently stopped in the exact same spot as the announcer. The balcony of sorts provided a panoramic view of the dungeon and its more intimate area, Rue Sensuelle—or as members called it, Kinky Avenue. In one of her more brilliant strokes of ingenuity, Aviana had devoted an entire section of the club to various role-play fantasies. His particular favorite was the doctor's office. He adored having a sub's legs as wide apart as possible.

“Tonight, we present to you the royal court.” With a flourish, the man on the screen extended his arm toward the top of the stairs.

Wearing a cloak, the club's receptionist, Trinity, descended the stairs, stopping to curtsy and wave from the balcony.

Aviana's head dungeon master, Tore, followed. This evening, he looked like more of a Viking than usual. The seams of his black vest appeared to be hanging by the barest of threads. Hayes saw him at the gym almost every day. But Tore was often there when Hayes arrived.

Like Trinity, the DM also paused before continuing his descent. How many times had this whole thing been rehearsed?

Mason Sullivan followed, along with his radiant and very pregnant wife, Hannah. As they were presented, Hannah cradled her stomach with tenderness.

“Oh my God, she’s glowing.” Abigail grinned.

Would an expectant Abigail be the same?

Jesus.

Hayes gave himself a firm mental shake. He would not permit his mind to wander there.

When Abigail returned her attention to the parade, he forced himself to as well.

Other court members continued to follow Aviana.

Rafe Sterling and his fiancée, Hope, were next. Then finally two of Aviana’s many slaves made their way down the staircase dressed only in tight black pants and leather harnesses.

Once again, an expectant silence descended over the club.

Abigail leaned toward him and whispered, “This is going to be good.”

The announcer blasted his trumpet again.

Then Aviana appeared in lights. *Good God.* She had to have been poured into her one-piece silver outfit. She towered in thigh-high lamé boots with heels at least six inches tall.

Her costume was complemented by an ice-blue cape with a train and a collar that framed her slender, beautiful face.

Tonight her hair was white and seemed to tumble all the way to the floor.

“I’ve never seen anything like that crown.”

The thing had spikes that seemed to be made from daggers. The camera zoomed in to show that the tips were shaped like snowflakes and reflected the light.

She threw her arms wide, seeking the adoration she craved. The crowd responded with enthusiastic shouts, catcalls, hollers, and applause.

“Can you believe her makeup?”

“It’s...” He was at a loss for words. He might have seen something like it before, but not outside of Broadway.

Aviana’s face sparkled. And her eyes were a shade of purple that seemed even brighter because of her long, white, fake eyelashes.

Then two helpers dressed in green elf uniforms joined her to offer support as she glided down the stairs. How she didn’t topple over, he had no clue.

The house lights came up a little, and festive techno music once again blasted through the club.

Various cameras showed the parade beginning, with the royal procession tossing Mardi Gras beads into the crowd as they wove their way through the dungeon, past suspension rigs, Saint Andrew’s crosses, and spanking benches.

On the screen, Aviana finally came into view. Nothing surprising him now, she sat in a sleigh that was pulled by her harnessed slaves.

Bar patrons erupted into cheers.

The rear was brought up by the bastard Evan Frost, dressed as Santa and belting out a hearty, “Ho, ho, ho.”

A woman Hayes didn’t recognize followed behind, dressed as an elf and handing out candy canes.

Still clapping like many others, her enthusiasm contagious, Abigail turned to him. “Isn’t Mistress Aviana something?”

“Oh, she definitely is.” *Manipulative. Brilliant. And a damn good friend, even when he didn’t want one.*

“When I checked in, I was informed that everyone is invited to visit her once the parade is over, and she’s seated on her throne.”

“*Invited?*” He allowed the word to linger.

“More of an order, from what I’m told.”

How well Abigail understood the owner’s decrees. Even he intended to follow them.

“Since I want to be sure my friend gets an invite to set up a booth at next year’s event, I intend to stay on her good side.”

“The corset business isn’t yours, then?” He’d wondered if she might use Aviana’s whims as an excuse to get away from him, but she didn’t.

“No. Raven owns the shop. I teach preschool and help her with special events.”

“You seemed to know what you were doing.”

She laughed. “I was petrified. When she left, I’d never even done a credit card transaction. I thought my brain would start short-circuiting on the first couple.”

“No one but you would have known otherwise.”

“Thank you for saying that. Dealing with three- and four-year-olds all day prepares you for anything.”

This was a celebratory evening. And the Quarter offered anonymity to those who wanted it. But it was also a place where people were real and exposed—emotionally as well as physically—in ways they weren’t anywhere else. And he yearned to peel back all of Abigail’s secrets. “Do you have children of your own?”

Pain, like he’d seen earlier, ghosted through her beautiful light blue eyes, leaving a trail of regret behind.

“I thought... I hoped...” She took a sip of her now-cold brew. Then she looked at him and pulled back her shoulders. “But no. At least not yet. The twenty students my aide and I have in class keep me busy enough.”

Did it fulfill her though?

The parade finally stopped. A blanket was removed from Aviana’s lap, and she was assisted onto the dais that held her throne.

Additional seating that wasn’t normally there flanked each side. Members of her court took their places.

A group of elves detached her slaves from their harnesses and moved the sleigh toward Santa’s high-back, velvet-covered chair.

Then a camera zoomed in on the Christmas tree. The enormous thing rivaled anything he’d seen outside of the Rockefeller Center.

“Oh my God.” Abigail gasped and laughed at the same time. “Can you believe this?”

Hayes had been friends with Aviana for too long to be shocked by much. But this...? The branches were decorated with hundreds, if not thousands, of glass ornaments all crafted in her likeness.

“I wouldn’t have missed this for the world. Raven is going to be so upset.”

Without him asking a question, she went on. “Her manager has the flu. So she ended up working an event in downtown.”

They returned their attention to the screen to watch Evan sit in Santa’s chair with a large white bag beside him. His elf assistant stood nearby, handing out candy canes.

Then the obnoxious trumpet sounded again. “Welcome to the Quarter’s Holiday Extravaganza! On Milady’s command, the tree will be lit, and Santa will start reaching into his bag with presents for the naughtiest of attendees.” The man paused to let expectation gather. “You know who you are.”

People in the bar laughed and pointed toward one another.

“Which are you?” Hayes asked Abigail.

She made a small circle above her head. “I’m a veritable saint. You, on the other hand, Master Hayes...”

Master Hayes. Dear fucking God. Up until their wedding night, Susanna had occasionally called him that. But it had never rolled off her tongue with such abiding respect.

He wanted to earn that from Abigail, wanted to deserve it.

“I’m right, aren’t I? More devil than angel?”

“I’ll let you be the judge.”

The crier made another pronouncement. “Our Lady *invites* everyone to parade past the reviewing stand.”

Aviana's slaves hurried into place to offer their assistance as she stood. "Join me in our countdown." Her voice resonated with command. There had to be a microphone hidden somewhere on her outfit, but only her costumer knew where. "Ten!"

The volume and excitement increased with each number.

On one, the tree blazed with color. From overhead, beams from red and green spotlights reflected off the glass and tinsel.

Music once again blasted through the space, and Mistress Aviana regally regained her seat.

Before daring to resume play, attendees—or rather, her subjects—formed a line that would take them past the court and then to Santa.

Abigail glanced at him. "Thank you for the coffee. I need to pay homage, then reopen the booth." She slid off her chair. "Merry Christmas, Sir."

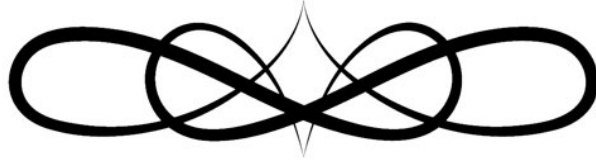
Then she vanished into the crowd.

"Merry Christmas, Sir." For a moment it had been. Maybe he'd glimpsed Christmas present. And it was a whole hell of a lot better than Christmas past.

But now it was gone.

If possible, he was even more lonely and restless than he'd ever been.

CHAPTER THREE



Desperate to regain her equilibrium, Abigail hurried into the dungeon and joined the line to greet Mistress Aviana and the rest of the royal court.

Before tonight, she had found Hayes McCall attractive. But now that she'd spent time with him, she saw him in a different, more complex light. She appreciated him braving a crowd for her caffeine fix. The coffee he'd selected had been perfect. But the depth of their conversation and his revelations touched her on an emotional level.

Which made him all the more dangerous —and alluring— to her.

She had been smart to escape when she did. But that didn't stop her from constantly glancing around, hoping to see him.

The wait seemed interminable, but when she reached the royal court, she marveled all over again at the sight of Mistress Aviana. No detail, from her crown to her makeup and the fit of her catsuit and flashiness of her boots, had been overlooked. Her outfit rivaled any A-lister Abigail had ever seen on the red carpet.

When it was her turn, Abigail curtsied. "Milady."

"I trust you're enjoying success at your booth?"

How did she manage to keep track of every member? “It’s been busier than last year. And that was our best yet.”

“Delighted to hear it.” With a regal nod, she turned her attention to the couple behind Abigail.

Dismissed, she continued on.

Since Santa was occupied by the scantily clad woman on his lap, she stopped to say hello to Kaylee. “How’s it going?”

She shot a scowl at her boss. “He’s terrible at work. But dealing with him being half-naked and watching people fawn over him, feeding his ego?” She rolled her eyes. “I keep focusing on the fact I get a week of vacation out of putting up with him.”

After giving her friend a quick hug of commiseration, Abigail slowly walked back toward her booth. With every step she told herself she was checking out the dungeon scenes while she had a chance. The truth was, she was looking for Hayes.

Was he still in the bar? Or had he left the Quarter without her knowing?

Not that it mattered. Expecting anything from Hayes would throw her onto an emotional rollercoaster.

When she made it back to the booth, a couple of customers were waiting for her.

Quickly she tied back the flaps and invited the potential patrons inside.

For the next hour and a half, she was kept busy, then business abruptly dropped off.

She recalled the same thing happening last year.

People played for a while after the parade and finished up their last-minute purchases before leaving to go home or out to breakfast.

When other vendors started to close up, she followed suit, placing items into boxes and sealing them shut.

She and Raven planned to meet up tomorrow morning to load the inventory into the company van, but the more Abigail got done, the faster they'd finish tomorrow.

Half an hour later, she sent a text to Raven, letting her know she was heading home and that the event had been a huge success.

Abigail crouched to grab her purse and the cashbox from beneath a table. Then she saw the handle bag with the corset that Hayes had bought her.

His gesture was far too extravagant, and the gift was the kind of thing he should have purchased for a lover, not a woman he didn't know.

Still, she'd wear it and remember him.

Now that it was close to being time to leave, all she could think about was relaxing at home with a cup of Mexican hot chocolate—most likely spiked. And it would be a blessing to get out of her boots and corset and into a warm bath.

Before leaving any event for the night, Raven always took the precaution of securing the stall by zipping it closed instead of just tying the flaps together. So Abigail grabbed the small ladder they'd used earlier. After opening it up, she climbed onto the first step. Even while standing on tiptoe, she couldn't quite reach the top of the canvas.

“Let me help you with that.”

Immediately recognizing the mesmerizingly deep voice, she froze. *Master Hayes.*

“Those boots were meant for a lot of things, but I’m sure climbing isn’t one of them.”

“I... Ah...” *Don’t have the courage to turn around and face you.* “Thank you, but—”

“The gentleman in me can’t abide seeing a damsel in distress.”

“Thank you. I can manage.” But she couldn’t, and the hasp remained a fraction of an inch out of reach.

“Since you won’t get down...” He moved in closer to slide an arm in front of her for support. Then he pressed himself against her back.

His body was all muscle and hard planes, in contrast to her soft curves. As if they were meant to fit together.

Abigail froze.

He reached over her head to grab the zipper, then drew it downward.

When she could grasp it, she thanked him. “I can get it from here. Thanks.” *Just let me go before I beg you to hold me forever.*

Thankfully he released her. Now that he had, she wasn’t certain her knees would support her weight.

Her hand shook, betraying the way he affected her. Her fingers slipped off the hasp once, so she had to grab it a second time.

Finally she was able to lower it halfway before stepping off the short ladder.

Though she expected him to move and give her room, he didn't, so when she turned, they stood mere inches apart.

Quizzically she tipped her head to one side as she looked up at him.

“I can't help but notice...” He pointed.

She glanced over her shoulder to see what he was talking about.

Mistletoe.

Oh, heavens no.

“I may be a scrooge, but even I know what that means.”

Frantically she shook her head. Her hat started to fall, and she grabbed the brim to hold it in place.

“What do you say, Abigail?”

No. *A thousand times, no.* “Mr. McCall...”

“Hayes.”

With his broad chest, rippled biceps, and eyes darkened with desire, he overwhelmed her senses.

“Or Sir, if you prefer.”

She blinked. Earlier this evening, she'd called him that, along with Master Hayes. But now it seemed more meaningful, making her hesitate.

“Will you allow me to kiss you?”

Her refusal should have been instant and firm.

Maybe it was the lateness of the hour, or the magic of the holiday, or her deep yearning for connection... But a dormant, lonely part of her ached to know how masterful his touch might be.

She rationalized that tomorrow would be soon enough for regrets. “Yes.” She looked up to meet his gaze. “Kiss me, Hayes.”

He swept her hat off before easing her back inside the booth. Then they were alone in a private cocoon, and the outside world didn't exist.

After placing the gadget-laden hat on the checkout table, he gently threaded a hand into her hair, then pulled back a little, holding her prisoner for him. It was a thoroughly Dominant move.

When he finally brushed his lips against hers, ripples of responsiveness shot through her.

“Open your delicious mouth for me, Abigail.”

When she did, he claimed her, gently at first, touching his tongue to hers. She tasted the bite of the coffee they'd shared but then the sweetness of the cream. As if knowing exactly what she needed—maybe even more than she did—he was gentle, coaxing her response.

When she relaxed into the trust he offered, he deepened the kiss.

Now it was about union and perhaps even inevitability.

She wanted him.

Rising onto her tiptoes, she wrapped her arms around his neck. As if he intuitively knew what she needed, he placed a palm on her lower back and brought her in even closer.

Now, their bodies separated by only their clothing, she had no doubt how much he desired her.

The realization sent desire careening through her.

Reading her perfectly, he deepened his possession, their tongues meeting in a thrust and parry. Nothing existed except his masculine demand and her womanly acquiescence.

Never, ever had she been kissed with this kind of ferocity. It thrilled her, awakening a rush of longing.

If he didn't end this soon, she would beg him to take her. And that would be a catastrophic mistake.

She relaxed her grip on him and placed her hands on his shoulders, trying to pull herself back a little. While she still could.

Slowly, as if reluctantly, he lifted his head before uncurling his fist to release the grip he held on her hair. His gentle pull had left her scalp tingling.

Neither of them moved, and their gazes locked.

His expression was as intent as it was predatory, triggering her fight-or-flight instinct.

Instead of doing anything, she remained in place, hypnotized by the power he held over her.

Her lips were swollen, and because the corset was so tight, she struggled to catch her breath. "I... Need to be going."

"Did you drive? Or catch a ride into town?"

"I have the company van." That was old and cantankerous.

"Did you check it with the valet?"

She shook her head. "They weren't open when we got here, so it's in a parking lot."

"I'll give you a ride to your vehicle."

Her protest came from a place of self-preservation. "That's not necessary. I can—"

“Are you always so stubborn?”

She clamped her mouth shut. If she argued, she’d prove his point. His Cheshire Cat-like smile showed he knew the same thing.

“If you think I’m letting you walk through the French Quarter at this time of the night in those heels and dressed as you are, you can think again, Abigail.”

The command in his voice left her no room to argue.

Nor did she really want to. His offer was a blessing. The last thing she wanted to do was walk half a mile in her boots.

“I’m ready anytime you are.”

Grateful to escape him, if only for a moment, she dragged the ladder back inside the booth, then gathered her belongings. She decided she could grab her hat tomorrow.

“You don’t need anything else?”

“Raven and I are meeting in the morning to load it all up.”

He nodded. After they ducked to exit the booth, he finished lowering the zipper. Then he pulled out his cell phone—the newest Bonds phone, if the shiny metallic surface and slick logo were anything to go by.

After typing in a few things, he repocketed the device and addressed her. “Anything else you need to do before we leave?”

“No. I’m ready.”

Together they walked to the reception area where Trinity waved. “Thanks for coming.”

How she could be so cheerful after a long day, with hours still to go... Abigail shook her head in awe. “Everything was

amazing. Thank you.”

At the top of the narrow, steep stairs, Hayes stopped her. “Let me carry your packages.”

He’d already done too much.

“Your choices are to let me give you a hand, or I’ll carry you.”

Abigail narrowed her gaze at him. His jaw was set in a sharp, uncompromising angle, and there was a determined gleam in his eyes.

“I think he means it!” Trinity called out, not helpfully.

“She’s right.” He didn’t smile.

“In that case...” Abigail turned over the cashbox and the bag, but she slung her purse over her shoulder.

As much as she would hate to admit it, she might have trouble navigating the darkened area without holding onto the banister.

When she pushed open the club door, the unseasonably warm, humid night air wrapped around her. Several people were waiting in the valet line, making her reconsider walking.

Just then a sleek black SUV pulled to the curb.

“Here we are.”

For a moment she stood there, shocked and unmoving. “Uhm... There’s no one behind the wheel.”

“It’s a Bonds vehicle. Autonomous driving.”

“Is that even legal?”

“I haven’t bothered to ask.” He placed a hand against the small of her back. “You have to admit it does have its uses.”

Like skipping the valet line.

As they approached, her door opened. “That’s a little freaky.”

“I told it to do that. Doesn’t read my mind, though I asked Julien to work on that.”

“Julien? As in Julien Bonds? You’re friends?”

“Acquaintances. Man keeps his circle small.”

She slid onto the luxurious leather seat. Accepting a ride might have been a bad choice. Now she’d hate riding in Raven’s company van even more.

Abigail gave him directions to the parking lot. Even though it was late, revelers were still out, so he drove cautiously to avoid those who stepped off curbs or partied in the streets without paying attention.

The drive to their destination only took a few minutes, and she reached for the door handle. “I appreciate the ride.”

Now that she knew him a little better—and the way he didn’t like to see a damsel in distress—she wasn’t surprised that he insisted on walking her the few steps to the van.

She hopped up into the vehicle, which was a bit of a challenge with her Steampunk outfit.

Though he closed her inside the compartment, he didn’t walk away.

Her mind still reeling from everything that had happened this evening, she slid the key into the ancient ignition and turned it.

An ominous clicking sound echoed through the vehicle.

“Oh no.” Abigail dropped her head to the steering wheel. The vehicle was moody under the best of circumstances, but this was the worst possible time for it to break down.

As she tried again, Hayes opened her door.

But of course, nothing changed.

“Let me give you a ride.”

“I could call an Uber.”

“You could.” Without arguing, he waited for her to sort through her options.

Raven would reimburse the cost of the ride. On the other hand, Abigail really wanted to go home now.

With a sigh, she yanked out the useless key and accepted the hand he offered.

In less than a minute, he’d transferred her items to his vehicle, helped her back inside the passenger compartment, and pulled onto the road.

“Where to?”

She gave him the address, and he gave the SUV instruction to drive there.

“Not too far.”

“It’s small, but something I can afford on my salary.”

Hayes selected a jazz station from a streaming service and turned the volume on low.

“No more Christmas music?”

In the darkness, illuminated only by streetlamps, he looked at her. “My ears are still ringing from the club.”

“Same.” She tipped her head back and relaxed. Such a different experience from making the trip in the van.

Which reminded her... She sent Raven a quick update, and reassured her everything was fine.

When Hayes turned into Abigail’s apartment complex, she instructed him where to go. “You can just drop me in front.” She worried her lower lip before exhaling. “Unless you would like to come up? I have Mexican hot chocolate. And a selection of things to spike it with. Tequila, rum, brandy, bourbon, depending on your choice.”

“You had me at bourbon. Where should I park?”

Unable to believe he’d accepted the offer, her heart stopped. Was it too late to rescind the invitation?

Her home was tiny, and he would dwarf it. “You know, my place won’t be what you’re accustomed to.”

“Are you calling me a snob?”

“No!” *Just a million- or bazillionaire.*

“I appreciate the invitation.”

After climbing the stairs to the third floor, she unlocked the door and saw the space through his eyes.

The kitchen island was stacked with cards and gifts from her preschool students. Her small tree had branches that dipped beneath the weight of far too many ornaments. A dozen pillows, all with holiday scenes, adorned the couch and chair. Her snuggly throw had a picture of a snowman.

The scent of balsam and fir lingered in the air from her wax melts.

He closed the door behind him and followed her inside to place her belongings on her table. But first he had to move aside wrapping paper and scissors along with the pile of presents she'd purchased for her friends.

"I love it."

She smiled at the way his mouth twitched. "Don't you dare say homey. That means it's a mess."

"Cozy. Lived in." For a moment, his eyes took on a faraway look.

To the past?

"Hot chocolate?" After plugging in the tree lights, she walked into the kitchen, and he took a seat at the island.

"I'm game to try it."

After grabbing a pitcher from the refrigerator, she turned to him. "You afraid of spice?"

He met her gaze. "It's my favorite thing."

Why did she think they were no longer talking about food?

She bent to retrieve a pan from a cupboard, then filled it with a generous amount of the batch she'd made yesterday. After putting it on a burner on low heat, she turned back to him and rested her hips against the counter. "I need to get out of these shoes." And the corset. But she didn't want to say that to him. "Make yourself comfortable."

"It's easy to do here."

Abigail walked past him, forcing herself to continue rather than stop to inhale his spicy scent or beg him to kiss her again.

In her bedroom, she removed her boots, then reached behind her to loosen the corset. A stubborn knot refused to

come undone, no matter how she contorted her body.

Frustrated, resigned, she padded back to the main part of her apartment. “Hayes, I er...” Her mouth dried.

He faced her, one eyebrow raised quizzically.

“If you don’t mind, I can’t undo my laces.” In the future, if she was alone, she needed to wear something that fastened in the front.

“Happy to help.”

Abigail turned her back to him, and he began to work on the knot. Trying to preserve her modesty, she held the corset close against her chest. The last thing she wanted was to give him an eyeful of her bare breasts.

He took less time to unravel the mess than she expected. Maybe from his familiarity with ladies’ lingerie?

“All done.”

She glanced over her shoulder at him.

“If you need help with anything else, let me know.”

Cheeks scalded with heat from her embarrassment, she fled to the bedroom, and she changed into leggings. Then she chose her thickest bra to disguise her rock-hard nipples before pulling on an oversize sweatshirt that was bedazzled with a reindeer.

Before rejoining him, Abigail slipped into a pair of flats.

Surely the way she was dressed would cool the desire that sparked between them.

But when she took her place in front of the stove to whisk the hot chocolate, he slid back onto his barstool to watch her.

When she hazarded a glance his way, his eyes were an even deeper shade of green than they'd been before. "Bourbon was your choice?"

"I'll go with whatever you recommend."

Because her recipe was full bodied, she preferred brandy.

Hyperaware of his scrutiny, she added a few more of her secret spices to the mixture, then placed a couple of stoneware mugs on the counter before whipping some heavy cream.

"That's a lot of work."

"Being in the kitchen is relaxing to me. Therapeutic as well. I forget all my troubles." As the mixture began to bubble, she turned off the heat. She filled their mugs and added a generous shot of alcohol.

"Don't worry. I'm not driving." He chuckled. "The car is."

Grimacing at his ridiculous attempt at humor, she gave him a little extra splash.

She dolloped cream on each beverage, sprinkled on more spice, drizzled chocolate across the top, and then garnished with cinnamon sticks.

"Is this a drink or dessert?"

"Yes."

Together they laughed, creating a bond more intimate than anything they'd shared so far. "Would you like to move to the living room? It's more comfortable."

Once they did, she curled into the far corner of the couch.

He sat on the middle cushion, not crowding her but at the same time, not giving her room to stretch out.

Hayes lifted his cup in her direction. Responding to his unspoken suggestion, she touched her rim to his.

He took a sip and nodded his appreciation. “This is amazing.” Then he coughed. “Holy...”

“You told me to bring on the spice.” *Sir*. She lowered her head, and her hair fell forward to shield her face and hopefully hide her grin.

“Damn. The chiles snuck up on me.”

“It’s meant to. The heat will build for a moment, then mellow. You get all the notes of the flavor that way. Makes it richer and more complex.”

“Maybe like the chef herself?”

“I’m hardly a chef.”

“Does it describe your personality?”

“I’ll leave it to you to decide.”

They fell into companionable silence, watching the tree lights blink on and off.

By the time she drained her mug, sleep threatened to pull her under. Tipping back her head, she closed her eyes.

She had no intention of drifting off, but when she reopened her eyes, Hayes was in the kitchen, loading the dishwasher.

Shocked, she stood. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’re worn out.”

“You didn’t have to—”

“Yeah. I did.” Drying his hands on a towel, he looked in her direction. “Only fair after you did all that work.”

Abigail didn't recall ever being so well cared for by a man, and she savored the experience. "You're spoiling me."

"I'm guessing it's about damn time someone did."

Does it come with a price? If so, was she willing to pay it?

He dropped the towel, then walked toward her. "That was the best hot chocolate I've ever had." He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

That sent her soaring in a whole different way than his earlier sizzling possession.

"What time are you meeting Raven?"

"Nine."

"I'll see you at eight forty."

"Hayes..."

"Or is eight-thirty better?"

She clamped her mouth shut. Already she'd learned that arguing with this Dominant was futile. "I'll meet you outside at eight-thirty. If you change your mind—"

"I won't." He pulled out his phone. "Give me your number in case I'm running early."

After she had, her phone rang. Of course he'd verify she'd given him the correct information.

He pressed a key to end the call, then repocketed the device.

When he crossed to the door, she followed.

"You need a sprig of mistletoe hanging here." He turned the lock, then paused to look at her again. "Abigail?"

In response, she tipped her head to one side.

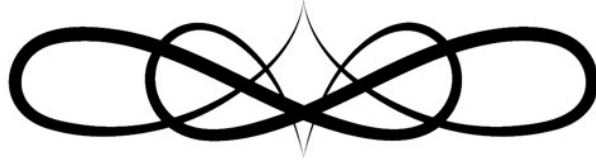
“Think of me.”

How could she not?

Without another word, he was gone.

For strength, she leaned against the nearby wall. Surrendering to his kisses had been a horrible mistake. Now she wanted so much more.

CHAPTER FOUR



Hayes McCall, the starring hero of the sexy dreams that had teased Abigail all night long, was leaning against the fender of his SUV, arms folded, sunglasses in place, looking sexier than anyone had a right to.

Since she had to work hard this morning, she'd dressed in comfortable clothing. He, on the other hand, radiated power and confidence in a suit coat and slacks. The billionaire and schoolteacher. Such an odd combination. "You're early." She'd walked out the door at eight twenty-five.

"Always." He opened the car door for her. "Wondered if you wanted to grab a coffee on the way in."

Her dreams about him had been fantastical, and in real life, he was even more amazing. "I'd love an eggnog latte."

"Something else I've never tried." He rounded the hood to slide into the driver's seat. "Does it have caffeine?"

"We can order them with extra shots of espresso."

"Then I'm in." He handed her his phone. "Want to order on the app?"

She took a minute to familiarize herself with the layout of the high-tech device, and she had to admit to loving the feel of the glass and sleek metal. Even if the price tag wasn't out of

reach, she wasn't sure she could ever justify paying three times the amount that her serviceable phone cost.

After she completed the purchase, he drove to the nearest location and told her to sit tight while he went inside to grab their order.

When they were on the road again, he waited for a stoplight to lift his cup. "Here's to another culinary adventure with you."

"Is that a good thing?"

"I don't know if all that spice burned my taste buds off or not."

She turned in her seat to watch as he took a sip. "What do you think?"

For a moment he didn't respond, as if considering his answer. "It isn't what I expected."

"In what way?"

"I was skeptical. But it's surprisingly good."

"Success." She took a drink of hers. "Oh my God. It's wonderful." The dark-roast-coffee-to-eggnog ratio was perfect, and the nutmeg dazzled her tongue. "I'm going to have to make this at home tomorrow. A splash of rum would jazz it up considerably."

"You're on winter break, I take it?"

"Not setting an alarm until next year is going to be heaven."

He laughed.

They pulled up in front of the Quarter.

Watching the car drive away by itself was a marvel. “It can actually find parking?”

“Programmed to search on the street and in nearby lots.”

“What if everything is full?”

“It will drive around until something opens up. Unlike me, it doesn’t get impatient.” He reached past her to push the bell next to the door. Then he beckoned her over so they both were in the camera’s view.

Moments later, the lock released, and he stepped aside so she could precede him up the stairs.

The club blazed with lights, and Mistress Aviana herself met them in the reception area.

Abigail had never seen the owner outside of regular operating hours. And she still dazzled. Though she was in jeans, they appeared to have been painted onto her body, and they were tucked into black riding boots.

She wore a slim-fitting shirt that matched the color of her hair. This morning, it was a foot or two shorter than it had been when she descended the staircase. Despite the fact she couldn’t have slept more than three or four hours, she looked as if she were ready for a magazine camera shoot.

“Hayes.” Her eyes, accented with rhinestones, were wide, intrigued. “Imagine seeing you here.” She turned her cheek so he could kiss it.

“Milady.” He did her silent bidding. “Beautiful as ever.”

Evidently done with him, she glanced at Abigail.

She curtsied. “Milady.”

“Raven tells me your evening was a resounding success.”

Abigail hadn't expected her friend to arrive for at least another half hour. "I think it's because your events are always so well attended."

"I'm glad you're pleased."

"Are you planning another extravaganza next year?"

"Something totally different. We've already hired a Hollywood director."

"Of course you have." Hayes's voice was dry. "If you'll excuse us." He placed his fingers in the small of Abigail's back.

"Hmm." Aviana folded her arms and curved her long fingers around her biceps.

When they arrived at the booth, Raven had already dismantled it and was sliding the last section into its hard plastic container.

"I thought you were going to wait for me," Abigail said by way of greeting.

"You only went home a few hours ago, and the van left you stranded. It's the least I can do." After finishing what she was doing, she stood and brushed her hands on the front of her jeans. "We're going to need new lights. I got pissed at how tangled they became when I took them down, and I threw them away."

"Can't blame you." Since they were glitchy, replacing them was a good idea.

"By the way, I found your hat, and I already packed it up." With a sassy grin, Raven looked at Hayes. "I understand you were a total badass last night."

"Raven! Oh my God, you did not just say that."

With a grin, Hayes looked at Abigail. “Was I?”

“Anyway, thank you for everything.”

“My pleasure to help Abigail.” The two shook hands.

“Anyway...” Raven was back to business. “I’ll call the auto service and have them meet me in the parking lot. I’m sure the van just needs a jump.” She sighed. “Or to be traded in.”

“It’s already handled.”

Both Abigail and Raven turned their attention to Hayes.

He shrugged. “I took the liberty. I hope that’s okay?”

“But...” Raven blinked. “How? And, I mean, why?”

“First, I knew where it was and have a friend who was happy to help. It needed a new battery and starter.”

“How did you get in?”

“There was a magnetic key holder beneath the right rear tire well.”

“So much for that being a great hiding place.” Raven dragged a hand into her hair.

“As for your second question, I’d do about anything to make Abigail’s life a little easier.”

Her knees went weak. And Raven shot him an enquiring look before placing her hands on her hips and swinging around to face Abigail. “Girl, I’m holding your hat hostage until we get together to talk.”

She didn’t understand Hayes’s generosity herself.

“Again, thank you for everything.” Raven pulled out her phone. “How much was the bill? I’ll pay you right now.”

“I was owed a favor.”

“That’s kind but far too generous.”

“Abigail, do you want to tell your friend that she’s wasting her breath? Why don’t you bring the van around so we can load it?” Then, conversation obviously over from his point of view, Hayes removed his jacket and hung it from the back of a nearby chair before getting to work moving boxes toward the top of the stairs.

“What the hell...?” Raven demanded when he was out of earshot.

All Abigail could do was turn up her hands, silently saying she had no idea. “He’s a force unto himself.”

“Dom all the way through. Demanding and bossy.”

Delicious as well.

“I’m serious that I’m going to want all the details.”

Abigail needed someone to process the events of the last twelve hours with. “How about tomorrow?”

“Call me whenever, but yes. I’d like to get together. Maybe have a drink at a nice hotel and enjoy the holiday decorations and maybe some jazz.”

“Maison Sterling?” Abigail suggested. It was one of the most elegant hotels in the French Quarter. The drinks were so expensive that she only visited once or twice a year.

Raven grabbed her car keys. “Since I’m buying, it’s a good thing we had such profitable events last night.”

Abigail had rung up a lot of purchases, but according to the text she received when Raven finally made it home, the downtown event had been even more successful.

Between the three of them and a couple of helpers from the club, they loaded the van in no time. And while she and Raven said goodbye, Hayes waited in the bar.

She saw him sitting at the same table they'd occupied last night, once again wearing his suit coat, and with two cups and a plate of bite-size scones in front of him. Across the middle was a long, wrapped present.

Drawing her eyebrows together, she approached. With old-world charm, he stood when she reached his side.

Sliding onto the stool was easier in leggings than it had been in a corset and skirt.

When she was comfortable, he took his seat again.

“What you did for Raven was really special.”

“She’s your friend.” His tone was matter-of-fact, as if that was all that needed to be said.

She pulled her cup toward her. “You’ve got to stop spoiling me.”

“Do I?”

Her first sip surprised her. She expected a cappuccino like last night, but this was a famous New Orleans café au lait. A perfect complement to the petite pastries he’d purchased.

“It’s time you knew I have ulterior motives.”

The bottom dropped out of her tummy. A moment ago, his voice had been cordial. Now it held a note of authority. “Oh?” Last night she’d wondered if he wanted to scene. After her dreams, she’d hoped he had.

He indicated the gift on the far side of the table. “When I dropped off my present last night, Santa’s elf informed me I

would receive one in return. Aviana gave it to me a few minutes ago.”

“Then it’s yours.”

He shook his head. “I want you to have it.”

“Hayes...”

“Open it, then make a decision as to whether you’d like to keep it.”

The suggestion was so reasonable that she nodded her agreement.

He placed the package in front of her. “Go ahead.”

More excited than she should be, she tore open the paper.

It was a crop. But the far end of the long, thin leather-wrapped shaft didn’t have a traditional flapper. Instead, it was topped with a puffy silver star, perfect for the holidays.

Against her better instincts, she wanted to keep it.

“May I?”

“Yes, of course.” She offered the toy to him.

He struck the star against his open palm, and the thuddy sound filled her ears, melting her resistance.

She looked at him. Was there any other man in the world?

“We have the club almost to ourselves.”

“What do you have in mind?” Her words emerged a little slower than normal as her brain began a familiar, welcome descent into a submissive mindset. Though she’d been determined to avoid any entanglement, every part of her yearned to experience what he offered.

“I’d like to make your Christmas wishes come true.”

“Honestly? You already have. The corset, this gift, the coffees, your help...the way you’ve been taking care of me?” She exhaled. “This time, I’d like to make *your* Christmas wish come true. Is there something particular you enjoy here?”

He didn’t hesitate. “My favorite is the doctor’s office.”

Abigail sucked in the tiniest breath. “I’ve never...” She struggled for the right word.

“Been so exposed?”

“That’s a good way to put it.” Even though the club didn’t allow nudity outside of the private rooms, very few people were in attendance, and there were workarounds to everything. No doubt he intended to be creative.

“If it’s too much for you...”

It probably wouldn’t matter what she selected. He wasn’t the type of man to be satisfied unless she revealed all her secrets.

Was she really going to surrender to his masculine power?

Would she be tormented with what-ifs if she didn’t? “I’m willing to try it.”

His eyes darkened, and he leaned toward her a little, stealing some of her personal space. “Is there anything I need to be aware of before we start?”

Knowing how critical it was to be transparent when negotiating a scene, she resisted the impulse to pull away. “It’s been a while for me.”

“We’ll go at your pace.”

Slowly she nodded.

“What’s your safe word? And one for slow?”

“I like to stick with the usual.” The ones the club’s DMs also enforced. “Red and yellow.”

“If you don’t mind, my charming submissive, I’ll save the rest of my questions until we’re in the exam room.”

Abigail sucked in a breath that she didn’t immediately exhale. He truly was masterful. They weren’t in the dungeon, and he was already exerting a little Dominance over her.

“Ready?”

“Yes.” This time, with a whisper, she added the word she knew he wanted. “Sir.”

He smiled, his expression so delighted and genuine that she wanted to please him even more and more.

After they stood, a server hurried over. Hayes asked her to save the pastries, saying they’d need a snack in an hour or so, along with fresh beverages. Then he requested a bottle of water for Abigail.

That handled, he stood, and she slipped her hand into the one he offered.

“Pick up the crop, please, Abigail.”

Her hand trembled as she followed his instruction.

As was becoming a habit, he placed his hand against her back as they left the bar. But this time, his palm was a little lower, his fingers splayed wider, as if marking her as his.

They walked down the hallway to the entrance to Kinky Avenue, the space in the club that Mistress Aviana had devoted to various role-play fantasies. Each space was partitioned off, creating a greater theatrical effect. At times rooms changed, but a few seemed to be perennial favorites.

One thing they all had in common: implements to add to the reality of the scene.

The schoolroom had a couple of desks with chairs attached, a blackboard, books, pens, paper, scissors, crayons, even a wicked-looking selection of canes.

Hayes stopped at the doctor's office and extended his hand, waiting for her to go in first.

As she looked around, her mouth dried.

There was a desk with a computer on it, an overhead cabinet that contained blue nitrile gloves, a rolling stool, a chair for her to sit in, and a metal tray holding numerous implements. The focal point of the room was an actual examination table, complete with a roll of protective paper to cover it.

“Place the crop on the tray, please, then make yourself comfortable on that chair.”

As nervous as she might be at a visit to her own physician, she did as he said.

He dragged out the rolling chair and sat on it, mere inches from her.

How could he possibly be more overwhelming now than he'd been even five minutes ago?

“I want to talk about your limits list.”

“Will I need one here?”

“Likely not. But I want to know what things freak you out. Anything psychological or that causes panic that you'd like me to avoid?”

“Having my breathing restricted.”

“Noted.”

“As far as limits, I love impact play. As long as it’s not too intense.”

He waited for her to go on at her own pace.

“I can handle more if I’m more mentally into a scene.”

“My intent is pleasure over pain.”

That hadn’t always been the case with Kevin. Sometimes he’d relieved his stress by giving her a too-hard paddling or spanking and demanding she take it without complaint.

“Use a safe or slow word at any time. You suffering in the mistaken belief that it will please me will only piss me off.”

Intrigued, she regarded him. “And how do you behave when you’re pissed, Sir?”

“I don’t withdraw my affection, but I will end the scene. I want you to crave my spankings and floggings, beg for them. Withholding them is the punishment.”

Lips pressed together, she nodded.

“Anything else, my charming sub?”

“No.”

He waited.

“No, Sir.”

From a hook in the wall, he took down a stethoscope.
“Lean forward a little for me.”

When she did, he placed the two tips in his ears then stroked his fingers down her spine before pressing the drum part against her back. “Are your nipples hard, Abigail?”

The unexpectedness of the question startled her. “Uh...”
They have been since last night.

“You might as well be honest. There will be no secrets between us on this visit.”

“Yes.” She cleared her throat so her voice wasn’t as squeaky. “I mean yes, Sir.”

He moved the stethoscope to her heart. “Racing a little.”

As if it might explode out of her chest.

“Everything seems to be in order.” He removed the stethoscope and smoothed her shirt into place. “And now, my dear patient, it’s time for you to disrobe.”

CHAPTER FIVE



Master Hayes's implacable tone, the inflection in his words, left her reeling.

He stood to open an overhead cupboard and pulled out a gown. "You may wear your panties, but when you put on the gown, remove your bra."

At least this was prettier than the ones she'd been forced to wear previously, but it was every bit as revealing.

Struggling against innate shyness, she toed off her shoes, then wiggled out of her leggings.

As rugged as he was imposing, he spread his legs and folded his arms, watching, waiting.

Finally she removed her shirt.

"Enchantress."

She'd never been called that before. Drawing confidence from his approval, she pulled back her shoulders. After all, this state of undress was nothing unusual at the Quarter.

Last night, attendees had paraded around in far less clothing than what she was currently wearing. One woman had donned a thong and placed a couple of pieces of black tape over her nipples. Many men had worn a pouch over their penises, and nothing more.

“Put it on.” He offered the gown. “Backward.”

Now she understood how he intended to have his way but also follow the club’s no nudity rule.

Under his watchful eye, she slipped into the garment and fastened the ties before reaching beneath the fabric to unfasten her bra.

With a little maneuvering, she managed to slip it off and drop it on top of the untidy heap of clothing she’d tossed on the chair.

“Everything about you is exquisite.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“On the table, Abigail.”

Thankfully there was a small step in front. Regardless, he cupped her elbow so she didn’t lose her balance.

When she was in place, he stepped back to look at her.

“Your pulse appears to be racing.”

“It is.”

“You’re nervous? Excited?”

“Both.” She hesitated, debating whether or not to reveal more. “Turned on.”

He smiled. “Nothing makes me happier. Fair warning, patient. I intend to keep you that way for a long, long time.”

“Edging?”

“The potential reward will be worth it.”

“*Potential?*”

“You’re wondering if you’ll get to orgasm?”

“Yes.” Did she sound as breathlessly needy as she was?

“That depends on my mood, doesn’t it?”

“But...”

“Your uncertainty will create a powerful aphrodisiac.”

Regardless of what he decided, she would be spending her afternoon with her vibrator. “Yes, Sir. Though it’s unfair if you leave me wanting.”

Without responding, he shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the wall along with the stethoscope.

Then he crossed to her.

The absence of loud moody music made her even more aware of her heartbeat.

He adjusted the back of the table so she was slightly upright.

Then he pulled the stirrups into place. As he did, the overhead light caught the jewels in his unusual ring. The gems seem to glow. She’d never seen anything like it.

“If you please...” His prompting brought her back to the present.

“Yes, Sir.” Struggling to tamp down a sudden attack of nerves, Abigail lifted her heels into place, settling them in the cool metal cradles.

“Oh so pretty.”

His words were lovely, but his tone conveyed genuine admiration.

Hayes captured her gaze and lifted his eyebrows as if waiting for a proper reply.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“When I say something, charming sub, I mean it. I’m not given to using flowery language, nor do I say things simply to make someone feel good. Quite the opposite, in fact. I’m known for my bluntness.”

Appreciating his reassurance, she nodded.

“Are you ready to start?”

Her slow burn of need chipped away at her nervousness. “Yes, Master Hayes.”

He sucked in a breath. “I like the sound of that on your lips.”

Referring to him with that kind of respect had been as natural as it was instinctive.

Moments later, he slid back the bottom part of the examination table, leaving her bottom suspended in the air, making her vulnerable to anything he might wish to do to her.

“We’ll start by testing your reflexes.”

He glanced at the crop. But instead of picking it up and delivering a couple of swats as she expected, he traced his fingertips up the inside of her thigh, all the way to her pussy.

She squirmed as arousal rushed through her.

“Very responsive.”

Frustrating her, he didn’t touch her there. Instead he continued his exploration down her other leg.

He pulled apart the ends of one of the gown’s ties, exposing most of her body.

Once again he moved his hand toward her womanhood, but just like before, he left her wanting. Keeping his gaze

focused on her face, he drew a straight line up from her belly, between her ribcage and breasts, and he stopped at the tiny hollow of her throat. Then he lightly stroked the side of her throat.

“Everything is perfect, Abigail.”

Silently begging for more, she arched her back.

“Ah. Was my examination not thorough enough?”

She burned for his touch.

“Shall I continue?”

Master Hayes was the perfect Dom. Seamlessly he threaded consent through their playtime, checking in on her without taking an emotional step back. “Yes, Sir.”

He retraced his path, but this time, he slipped a hand beneath her gown to capture one of her breasts, his palm grazing her nipple.

She gasped.

“Very responsive.”

No man had ever brought her to life this way.

Then he moved on to her other breast, kneading it lightly, making her nipple throb.

“You seem to like that.”

“It’s... Amazing.”

When he moved away, she squeezed her eyes closed in frustration.

He’d promised—*threatened?*—to arouse her completely, and he had. The uncertainty of not knowing if he’d give her an orgasm was driving her mad.

Do a complete exam, Sir.

For minutes he was relentless, barely touching her skin and avoiding her most needy place.

Finally he stroked between her legs. She exhaled a soft sigh. "About time."

"I wouldn't have known you were so demanding, my charming sub." Though his words were serious, a playful tone took any heat from them.

"Before you, Sir, I wasn't."

Heat blazed in his eyes. "Good."

He moved aside the gusset of her panties to press a finger to her clit.

Crying out, she dug in her heels a little deeper for leverage so she could beg for more.

He gave it to her, parting her labia, then dampening a fingertip to toy with her swollen clit.

"How long would it take for you to come?"

"Seconds maybe." In fact, she was already on the edge.

"But you don't have permission for that, do you?"

His denial only increased her body's restlessness. "*Sir...*"

"You're wet, Abigail."

His observation made her even more miserable.

"Shall I lick you?"

Instinctively she tightened her buttocks as if that could save her. "No!" She wouldn't be able to survive without shattering.

As she watched, he licked his finger.

Instantly his nose flared. “Fuck, Abigail. I can’t get enough of you.”

An impressive erection pressed against the front of his trousers. That he wanted her so badly made her dizzy.

Hayes parted her labia, then made tiny circles on her clit, flooding her with erotic greed. Then he took the few steps necessary to stand right next to her head. “Open your mouth.”

Helpless, entranced, she did, tasting herself on him.

“I’m giving you the chance to safe word. Or I’m eating your pussy and finger-fucking you.”

Her only fear was that she’d come, despite the fact he’d ordered her not to.

When he withdrew his fingers, she closed her mouth, offering silent assent.

“Very well. I’ll continue my exploration of your body, Abigail. And your secrets.” He reached inside her gown, capturing each nipple.

Unblinkingly she looked at him.

Why did he always do the unexpected?

“Do you like them to be pulled?”

God, yes. She nodded.

“That’s not good enough.” He was so very close to her, filling her vision, branding her senses with his spicy, crisp masculine scent. “Tell me. I want to hear your words, all breathless and begging. Right now, you’re mine, and I want you to acknowledge it out loud.”

Other Dominants that she’d been with weren’t like him. He seemed to want her active participation in this primal

dance. “Yes, Hayes.”

“Ask.” He released his grip.

Blood rushed back into the swollen tips, heightening the sensations that crawled through her. “Please, Master Hayes. Tug on my nipples.”

“Anything else?”

“Squeeze them, Sir.” She wanted the pain that yielded to pleasure.

“Play with yourself while I do.”

She thrashed her head back and forth.

He released one nipple to spank her pussy.

“Sir!” He used just enough force to refocus her attention on her body’s incessant demands.

“If I have to repeat myself, you will regret it, my charming submissive.” His jaw was set in an uncompromising line.

He squeezed her one nipple harder as he purposefully drew back his free hand again.

“I’ll do it, Sir!”

“Good girl.”

Doing as he said was pure anguish, forcing her to writhe as she fought to hold back her climax.

He manipulated her nipples, sucking, gently drawing his teeth across them.

Her internal struggle to obey him made her cry out.

“Almost there, Abigail?”

“Please, Sir. Stop. Stop, stop, stop.”

But he continued until she was on the absolute verge of losing control, then he released her to clamp her wrist and draw her hand upward. “Thank me for saving you from yourself.”

Her gratitude should have been automatic, but she was so far gone inside her head that she was no longer capable of proper submissive behavior. “Thank you, Sir.” She meant it.

“That’s better. Your manners are beautiful”—he narrowed his gaze—“when you remember to use them.”

There was warning in his words, and she was wise enough to heed it. “I appreciate your saying so, Master Hayes.”

Before she could gather her wits, he replaced her fingertips with his mouth, devouring her pussy in slow, rhythmic licks. Helplessly she ground her face against him, and he responded with his tongue, circling, then plunging inside her pussy.

With her lower body still suspended, she was unable to escape his determination.

Finally he lifted his head.

“Thank you, Sir.” How many times had she been to the edge, only to be denied?

“My pleasure.” Looking at her, he slid a finger inside her, seeking her G-spot. Once he found it, he pressed against it.

“Oh my God!” Electricity seemed to pulse through her. Grateful for the support of the stirrups, she bucked, and she was unsure whether she was silently asking for more or trying to evade him.

“That’s it. Fuck my finger, Abigail. Prove you’re mine.”

“Master Hayes...”

“Do as I say.”

The world started to spin. Anxious to distract herself, she gripped the edge of the table, digging her fingernails in.

“Pump your hips harder. Hold nothing back. I want your responses.” His voice deepened. “I own them.”

And her.

She squeezed her muscles as she rode his finger. But when he pushed his thumb against her clit, she went rigid. An orgasm gnawed at her, increasing its ferocious demand.

Slowly he withdrew his finger. “I’m thinking you were close?”

How many times was he going to deny her? This hadn’t been the kink of any other man she’d been with. And he’d already pushed her beyond what she’d believed were the limits of her endurance. “Very close, Sir.”

Slowly he withdrew his finger. “You did well.”

“Only because you stopped.”

His expression softened. “Is that gratitude?”

“Heartfelt, Sir.”

“Accepted. Shall we continue?”

“We... You...”

He waited.

“That wasn’t it? I mean, there’s more?” She’d never had a scene that lasted so long.

“I’m just getting started.” He slid the silk of her panties back into position. After picking up the crop, he rained tiny smacks up the insides of her thighs, retracing his earlier path.

His taps were lighter still on her belly.

The tiny, soft kisses kept her on the edge that he'd already pushed her to.

“Hold one of your breasts for me.”

Smoldering with the desire he ignited, she reached beneath the gown. Her nipple stood erect as he bounced the silver star off it.

Response arced through her.

“Now the other one.”

She wasn't sure how long she could endure his terrible, sweet torment.

On and on he went, before he shocked her senseless by gently spanking her clit.

Everything she'd been through reached a crescendo, and she could no longer hold back.

Abigail screamed his name as the most powerful climax of her life rushed through her, leaving her lost in an unending spiral of bliss.

When she opened her eyes, her Dominant stood over her. He brushed strands of hair back from her face, then kissed her forehead.

How was it possible that he knew her body so well when they'd never played before?

Slowly she released her hold on her breast. The amount of attention he'd given her was not nearly enough for her body.

Still close, wearing a triumphant expression, he asked a damning question. “You didn't come, did you?”

Of course he knew the answer. He'd deliberately, relentlessly driven her that direction.

Abigail took a moment to gather her wits. Though there was no way out of this, she still had to try. "What happened wasn't my fault."

"I see." A tiny smile toyed with his lips. "Are you blaming me for your lack of control?"

Helplessly she clamped her mouth closed.

"And you believe your protests will sway my intentions?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I can hope so, Sir."

"I assure you, I've cataloged your transgression."

Afraid of that, Abigail blew out a helpless breath.

"We'll go on. This time the crop will deliver a little bit more of a bite. Let's explore the other side of your body."

If her Christmas wish came true, this morning would never end.

Hayes pulled the bottom part of the table back into place, giving her support once again. Then he lifted each of her ankles from the stirrups before helping her to sit up while he laid the table flat once more.

"My next instruction is for you to stand on the step and turn around and bend at the waist. Your stomach will be flat on the table."

She met his eyes.

His voice resonated with power, and right now he terrified her as much as he thrilled her.

When he offered his hand, she accepted. Immediately he closed his grip. He was so much larger than she was. While

she knew how gentle he could be, she had no doubt of his strength.

He supported her as she stood and followed his order.

The top tie of her gown came unfastened, gaping open, which meant her bare breasts were against the coolness of the table.

“Do you suppose there’s a penalty for orgasming when I told you not to?”

Please, yes. “That’s at your discretion, Sir.”

“I will point out that you compounded your first error by arguing about it and blaming your Dominant.”

She turned her head, hoping to catch a glimpse of him.

His back was turned to her, and he was rolling up his sleeves.

The mere sight of his forearms and rippling biceps was enough to arouse her once again.

“Do you agree?”

To be fair, she couldn’t exactly say yes. After all, it *had* been his fault. Without his devilish touches, she would have never climaxed. “Anything you say, Sir.”

“Clever response.” He faced her. “Now reach your hands above you to grasp the end of the table.”

With the new position, he’d managed to create his own version of a spanking bench.

Now, using the end of the crop, he tapped the insides of her knees to indicate he’d like her legs farther apart.

After she complied, a small clatter reached her. Then he took hold of her buttocks and dug in his fingertips.

She sucked in a shallow breath before settling herself more completely against the surface beneath her.

“That’s it. Now turn in your toes slightly.”

This she was more familiar with.

He spanked her a few times, not hard, just enough to ensure blood flow to her skin.

This was delicious—especially now that the need to come had receded.

Hayes settled into a pace that lulled her into a relaxed state. The dull thud of a smack, followed by him rubbing the area.

As he increased the intensity, she barely noticed.

“Are you doing okay, Abigail?”

“Mmm...” She closed her eyes. From here, she could easily fall asleep.

“How many spanks was that?”

Somewhere between a dozen and a thousand. She didn’t know. Didn’t care.

“Abigail?”

“Not enough.”

He moved positions, and he switched his hand for the crop. He varied the location and depth of his strikes—above her knees, many on her sit spot, most on the fleshiest part of her rear.

“Shall I continue?”

She should say that it was up to him. “Most definitely.”

He cropped her pussy, making her release her grip and push off the table. “Sir!”

“Back in position, Abigail.”

Until she settled herself, he continued his relentless assault on her swollen private parts.

A couple of strikes, and her clit was engorged again.

The more swats he gave her, the worse her ache grew.

Suddenly everything stopped.

Confused, she angled her head so she could look at him, and she watched as he placed the crop on the metal tray once more. “Sir?”

“That’s enough for today.”

Enough?

“You may stand.”

Was he seriously going to leave her like this, yearning for completion, for him?

She needed more than a minute to reorient enough to make it back to the chair where she’d sat when they started the scene.

Was he finished with her? Rejecting her? “Have I done something wrong?”

“Wrong?” He scowled ferociously. “How could you think that?”

“You just... We...?” Damn it. Tears stung her eyes.

“You misunderstand.” He crouched in front of her. “I’d like to take you home, Abigail.”

Before she could finish processing what he was saying, he finished. “To my house where we’ll have complete privacy.”

CHAPTER SIX



Maybe scening with the lovely Abigail hadn't been Hayes's brightest idea. The connection they shared was playing hell with his intention to avoid all emotional entanglements.

But damn it, she was so sweetly perfect that he hadn't been able to stop himself.

Across the car's compartment on the way to his house, he slid her a glance, only to find she was studying him.

From the moment he'd seen her at the club last night, he'd been enchanted. The kiss beneath the mistletoe, combined with the sweetness of her reaction, had mended pieces of his broken heart.

Later, at her apartment, he'd been comfortable. Her space was cozy and inviting, and he hadn't wanted to leave. Back at his dark, empty house, he'd thought of her. Obsessed over the image of her submitting to him.

Now that she had?

Hayes was doomed.

After he'd given her an orgasm, then spanked her, he'd known their time wasn't enough. Maybe never would be.

He wanted her beneath him, in his arms. And he'd move the heavens to ensure it happened.

Before he invited her home, tears had filled her eyes.

The thought occurred to him that for a moment she thought he was rejecting her. He hated that he'd caused her to doubt herself of him, and he wanted to banish the haunted look from her luminous blue eyes and never hurt her again.

“Do you mind if we listen to Christmas music? I know you prefer jazz or instrumental.”

Anything to make her happy. He pushed a button on the dash, and a smooth female voice responded with, “*How may I serve you, sir?*”

He scowled.

“*How may I serve you?*” Abigail repeated. “Is that how you like to be addressed?”

“Goddamn it. Fucking Bonds.”

She laughed.

“Damn prankster.” With a sigh, he explained what was going on. “Bonds is debuting a new product at the upcoming tradeshow in Vegas. I’m beta testing the project.”

“What is it?”

“I’m swearing you to secrecy.”

She rolled her eyes. “As if anyone would believe me anyway. There are always so many rumors about what he’s doing, including intergalactic travel.”

“He’s calling it a chief of staff. It doesn’t just respond to your commands. Its AI integration allows it to do your scheduling, remind you of your priorities, handle tasks like shopping, even block certain people from reaching you. Not just an assistant, but an extension of your own brain. He

developed the idea while watching a documentary on the president of the United States. Chief of staff is considerably more important than any assistant.”

“True. Honestly I find it a little terrifying.”

“I’d agree, if it wasn’t so glitchy.”

“Do you still require my assistance, your lordship?”

Was it his imagination or did his chief of staff’s tone change? The thing was more annoying every minute. He gave Abigail a quick glance. “Tell her what to do. Let’s see how well she responds to your voice.”

“Please play classic “Jingle Bells.”

Dead silence echoed through the car.

“I’m sorry, your lordship. My programming informs me that you’re a scrooge and won’t have a female companion with you.”

Abigail grinned, then tried to smother it behind her hand when he shot her a frown. “I’m sorry.” Her attempt to be polite failed, and she ended up laughing. “You’ve got to admit, that’s some funny stuff there.”

“I think Bonds will like you.”

“Oh, he does, your lordship.”

Hayes tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “Not you, asshole. I was referring to the lady.”

“Begging your pardon, sir.”

“My companion made a request, and it’s your job to make her happy.”

“Indubitably.”

“Report you programming bug to Bonds.”

“Terribly sorry, sir. I don’t understand your request. There’s been no error at all. I’ve precisely performed the way the Genius intended.”

“Evidently the chief of staff isn’t quite ready for prime time.”

“I heard that.”

“You were meant to.”

The voice huffed.

“Now do as the lady said.”

“Do you have a preference of artist, ma’am? Bing Crosby? Frank Sinatra? Dean Martin? Perhaps Alvin and the Chipmunks?”

“What?” Hayes demanded. “Alvin and the fucking Chipmunks?”

“I believe it’s Alvin and the Chipmunks, sir. No fucking, your lordship.”

Abigail couldn’t seem to stop laughing. “Is your chief of staff serious right now?”

Immediately the outrageous, high-pitched voices of the rodent trio wailed from the car speakers.

Hayes groaned. “Make it stop.”

The volume increased.

Before now, the thing hadn’t argued with him, and Hayes preferred it that way.

“Excuse me, Chief of Staff?” Abigail said between her little gasped breaths. “Could you please play Sinatra’s version

of the song?”

“My pleasure, Miss. Or is it Ms.? Mrs.?”

Hayes shut down the line of questioning. “Tell your creator to quit being nosy.”

“Perhaps you’re referring to the Genius?”

If Hayes had any idea how to uninstall the AI upgrade, he might just do it. “Call her Abigail.”

“I exist to please, Abigail.”

Finally something that wouldn’t burst his eardrums filled the passenger compartment.

“This is the best car ride ever.”

For one of them. And Bonds, perhaps. If he was listening to the exchange.

When the song switched from instrumental to words, Abigail sang along.

This time, he was the one who chuckled.

“I know. I know. I’m terrible! But I’m not going to let that stop me.”

What she lacked in talent, she made up for in enthusiasm.

When they reached the chorus, she looked at him. “You know the words.”

Her joy was contagious. Surprising even himself, he joined in.

When they reached a congested area, he had to slow down, but for once the delay didn’t bother him. It gave him time to notice the holiday displays and occasional Christmas tree

stand. He drove this direction most days. How had he not seen all the banners and frivolity until now?

Maybe drowning in the past hadn't served him well.

At a stoplight, he glanced at her. "Are you hungry?" Neither of them had eaten breakfast, and they hadn't touched the scones he'd bought at the Quarter. The server had packaged them in a to-go box, and they'd make a good snack later. "For what I have in mind, the eggnog lattes and café au laits won't fuel us for long."

"Oh? In that case, you'd better fortify yourself."

"Cheeky wench." Hayes was more concerned about her stamina. At this moment, food was running a distant second on his body's list of demands. "Any particular place or type of food?"

"Cajun? Creole?"

He chose a place on Chartres Street that specialized in both. At one time he'd been a regular. Now he couldn't recall his last visit. This afternoon, it was important to him to share it with Abigail.

Since Christmas was only three days away, the area was crowded, so he double-parked, assisted Abigail from the vehicle and onto the curb, then told his chief of staff to find an open spot. At least the self-driving mechanism was something Bonds had perfected.

Unsurprisingly the restaurant lobby was packed, but once the owner saw him, she swooped in. "I'll be! Hayes McCall! It's been an age." She enveloped him in a huge hug. When she finally let him go, she waved a hand. "Come with me; come with me you two."

He and Abigail followed the proprietress to a back staircase and up to a tiny room on the second floor.

“I’m glad to see you, Hayes. Christmas miracles do happen.” She swept him into a second hug before turning her eye to Abigail. “Who do we have here?”

Hayes introduced Abigail to Emilie.

“Welcome to Chaudière, Miss Abigail. I’m mighty pleased you’re here.”

“Thank you. My tummy started rumbling the moment we walked in.”

“You came to the right place. Oui. Now make yourselves comfortable, you hear?”

Hayes pulled back Abigail’s chair for her.

Seconds later, the server arrived with a basket of bread and informed them of the day’s special, the Taste of New Orleans platter, featuring four of their signature dishes.

“That makes it easy.” He glanced at Abigail who nodded enthusiastically. “We’ll go with the best of the best.”

“Something to drink?”

Abigail glanced at him.

“Unsweet tea.” A subtle signal of the direction he hoped the rest of the day would go.

Pleasing him more than words could express, Abigail followed suit. “Make that two.”

As they waited for their entrées, Abigail regaled him with stories of her preschoolers and their antics. And she talked about a couple of students who struggled due to issues at home. “Those break my heart.” Then, after shaking her head,

she changed the subject. “How is your son coping with the changes to his life?”

“Trenton’s in kindergarten, and his teacher recently called us in for a meeting. He’s a little rambunctious, and he doesn’t seem as engaged as he was earlier in the year. Susanna thinks he’s not trying hard enough or other kids are distracting him.” Now he wondered.

“He’s got you. That makes him lucky.”

And maybe he had room for improvement.

Their meal arrived.

“I can’t believe the size of this.”

The sampler platter contained full-size portions of gumbo, red beans and rice, jambalaya, and crawfish etouffee.

When she took a bite of the chicken and sausage gumbo, she momentarily closed her eyes. “I may have died and gone to gastronomic heaven.”

“Gastronomic?” Unsure he’d ever heard anyone actually use that word, Hayes laughed.

“Culinary? Cajun?”

“Any of the above.”

“I can’t wait to come back here with my friends.”

“The balcony is a great place to people watch.”

“I definitely want to try that with a hurricane. Or two.”

Though they’d started their meal enthusiastically, the food was hearty, and they began to slow down.

“I have a question for you.”

The seriousness of her tone interested him. “Go ahead.”

“I can’t help but wonder about your ring. The stones appear to wink in the light.”

How did he respond? She’d been forthcoming with him, and he owed her something in return. But Titans rarely discussed the existence of their secret society. He opted for the truth, but didn’t reveal more than he had to. “It symbolizes an organization I belong to.”

“Not one I’m familiar with, I’m guessing. Because I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Probably not.”

“And you can’t say more?”

Her question was astute. “Correct.”

“I see.”

If his guess were correct, she wouldn’t rest until she uncovered the mystery. Even though there was more online about the Zeta Society than there ever had been, the vast majority of it was speculation and conjecture. Still, a lot of it was true, including guesses about the identity of some of the members, including world leaders, award-winning authors and playwrights, actors, activists, and even Eldon Miskin, a gazillionaire who focused a lot of attention on blasting rockets into outer space.

Their server returned, effectively saving him from answering further questions. The woman didn’t seem at all surprised by how much they had leftover. “Shall I wrap this up for you to take home?”

“Please.” Save him from ordering dinner later. The fewer interruptions he and Abigail had, the better.

When their server delivered the bill and handle bag filled with food, she smiled. “There’s also chocolate pecan pie and homemade pralines in there. Compliments of Emilie.”

Abigail’s eyes lit up. “Are you kidding me? My favorites. Please convey our gratitude.”

He loved the way so many things delighted her.

Once the check was settled, they headed back outside into the remarkably clear, sunny day. Then the car arrived.

Once again, she asked the assistant to play classic Christmas carols on the way to his house on the north side of City Park.

“I love this area of town.”

“It works well for me and Trenton. After the divorce, I downsized, and I wanted a place where he could get outside and run or play. We ride bikes together when the weather permits.”

“Idyllic.”

For the first time he saw his life through her eyes.

Having his family break apart was not what he’d wanted, and he’d loved his previous home in the Garden District.

But the new memories he was creating with his son mattered as well.

Her voice soft, as if she didn’t want to intrude, she asked. “Is he with your ex this weekend?”

“They’re in Aspen with her boyfriend until after the New Year.”

She winced on his behalf. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

Though she said nothing, Abigail gently touched his hand.

“You said you had no kids.” He wanted to know everything he could about her.

“I was with a man, and we were talking about getting married.” She turned slightly in her seat.

Hayes instructed the chief of staff to lower the volume. This time, she did so without argument.

“He already had a family. Which was fine, but he never let me spend time with them. It’s like he had separate lives, and the two never intertwined.” She shrugged, but her voice wavered as she told her story. “Of course I wanted him to be a good dad, but I also wanted kids of our own.” She twisted her hands together in her lap. “I’m one of those women who has always wanted to have a baby. My parents were never married, because...”

Hayes didn’t like where this was going.

“He was married with a family of his own, and even though his wife found out about the affair and baby, they stayed together. Sometimes he sent child support, but mostly he didn’t. I’ve seen him twice.”

He winced.

“Mom never had another relationship, and she died when I was eighteen.”

“I’m sorry, Abigail.”

“Thank you. Anyway, having more children was a deal breaker for my former boyfriend, Kevin. I would have given up my dreams if he would have let me be part of his family.” She tried for a smile that fell flat. “He refused and walked out.

I guess it was better that it happened before we got married, right?”

The similarities didn't escape Hayes. He had a child of his own and wasn't sure he wanted to take the risk of having another marriage that might end in devastation.

He needed to tread carefully with Abigail's caring heart.

A few minutes later, after the car was tucked away in the garage, he invited her inside for a tour.

She went straight through to the bank of windows at the back of the house. “It overlooks the park. Are you kidding me?”

“My favorite feature.”

“I'd have signed on the dotted line in a heartbeat.” She grinned wryly. “Well, I mean, if I had the funds.”

He placed the leftovers in the refrigerator before removing his suit coat and showing her the rest of the house.

“Everything is perfect. A little less cluttered and more orderly than my place.”

And a little less like a home.

He brewed coffee for each of them, and they sat outside, enjoying the warmth and watching passersby.

“I'd never want to leave this spot.” She took a sip of her drink. “Well, except for in the middle of summer. In that case, I'd enjoy it from the other side of the glass.”

“With air conditioning.”

“Exactly.”

He looked at her, and the energy that had been simmering between them all afternoon became molten. “I'd like to make

love to you.”

“I’m on the pill.”

“And I have protection.” Evidently they were both cautious. “Is that a yes?”

She nodded. “Yes, Hayes.”

They both stood, and she picked up their empty mugs before following him inside the house.

After locking the door, he addressed the house computer. “Chief of Staff, close all blinds.”

A male voice cheerfully responded. “*Aye, captain.*”

“You have a different assistant in the house? I thought all of Bond systems were fully integrated.”

They were supposed to be. Who the fuck knew what the self-proclaimed genius was up to? “This morning it was the same—impertinent—female voice.” He moved into the living room, but Abigail busied herself in the kitchen, rinsing the mugs.

“Leave them. I’ll clean the kitchen later.”

“You bought lunch and made coffee. Fair is fair.”

“Everything doesn’t have to be quid pro quo.”

She shrugged. “Isn’t that what friendship is about? Working together?”

“Friendship?” The word crawled up his spine. “*Friendship?* You think that’s what this is?” He wasn’t sure what the confounding fuck it was, but friendship sure as hell wasn’t it.

“No offense meant.”

His burst of temper didn't seem to ruffle her. Standing her ground in the middle of his kitchen, she regarded him quizzically. He admired the hell out of that, and her evenness shaved the edges off his anger. "I like to take care of you, Abigail. And I damn well will. Be clear about one thing, I don't expect anything in return. Any questions?"

"Hayes..." Her eyes were filled with compassion. "I accept you as you are, and I appreciate you. But I am who I am as well. Nurturer."

A woman who wanted a family of her own.

He exhaled. Her statement was fair. By way of apology, he tried again. "Is there anything you need to be comfortable?"

"Yes." She loaded the dishwasher, then dried her hands. "For you to kiss me."

"I could do that all night long. And I may. Come here." When she did, he pulled her against him and held her tight, one hand in her hair, the other on the curvy ass he'd so thoroughly spanked.

This time there was searing familiarity between them. Her response was immediate and warm, and she melted against him without needing to be coaxed.

Reluctantly he released her, but only long enough to sweep off her sweatshirt so he could suck on her nipples.

"Hayes..."

"Don't forget who I am. My rules still apply. You'll need my permission before coming." This time, though, he wouldn't withhold it. He wanted to own her.

"I need to touch you."

"Do."

Her hands shook adorably as she unfastened his buttons, and he ended up removing his shirt while she ran her hands over his chest, exploring the angles of his body.

Then she surprised him by dropping to her knees and unbuckling his belt and lowering his zipper.

A proper submissive might ask for permission, but she didn't, and he encouraged her unbridled passion.

When she released the button at his waist, his trousers fell, and she reached inside his boxer briefs to wrap her hand around his length.

“My God, Sir. You're huge.” She stroked him, exerting the perfect amount of pressure.

Fuck. At this point, he was the one in danger of coming too quickly.

Hayes swept her hands aside to finish undressing and pulled out his wallet, searching for an all-but forgotten condom. Then, realizing he had no idea how long it had been in there, he checked the expiration date.

“Is it still good? Tell me it's still good.”

“It's got a few months left.” Right now he didn't want to head for the drug store. He tossed it to her. “Put it on me, submissive.”

“My pleasure.” But before she did, she lowered her head to lick precum from his slit.

He captured her head between his palms.

She continued on, swirling her tongue around his cockhead and then sucking him into her mouth.

“Good God, sub.” His knees threatened to buckle. Next time, he’d be certain to sit first. *Next time?* Where the hell had that thought come from? Was he finally able to think about the future?

No doubt deliberately tormenting him in retaliation for his orgasm denial, she took her time. “It’s a dangerous game you’re playing.”

“Is it, Sir?”

The more time they spent together, the more he realized how complex she was. Intriguing. Captivating.

“Take me, Sir?”

Not quite yet. “I want you on the dining room table.”

“I...” She blinked, so confused it was adorable.

“To start with.” At the Quarter, he’d been aware of the rules. And there were things he didn’t want to do to her in public. “Get a move on.”

She scrambled up to follow his order.

When they were in the adjoining room, he grinned. “You’ll need to finish undressing.”

Quickly she removed her remaining clothing. Standing there naked, she pulled back her shoulders.

He appreciated that she was so much more confident than she’d been earlier. “I will never tire of looking at your beautiful body.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Now, on the table.” He pulled back a chair to make a space for her. “Face up.”

“You didn’t get enough earlier, Sir?”

He shook his head. “And this time, my charming little submissive, my body will be your stirrups.”

She sucked in a sharp, sensual breath, and her eyes widened. Damn, her face was so beautifully expressive. He wondered if she was capable of hiding her emotions.

Hayes hoped not.

Abigail was such a refreshing contrast to the woman who’d smiled as she lied to his face and walked out the door to fuck another man.

“Scoot closer to me.” When she did, he knelt in front of her and removed his ring. “Place your legs over my shoulders.”

She wiggled herself into position, and he inhaled her sexy, musky scent. In primal response, his cock throbbed.

Her pussy glistened, and he appreciated that she was turned on before he’d even touched her. “You can prop yourself up on your elbows if you’d like.” In fact, he wouldn’t mind looking at her face as she came.

The way she bit her lower lip in anticipation compounded his need to bury himself deep inside her heat.

This time, with not even a scrap of silk separating them, he devoured her the way he’d wanted to earlier: tasting, licking, sucking, nibbling, and sliding two fingers inside her while he did.

“God. Master Hayes.”

He’d never grow weary of hearing her moan his name.

“This is...”

Showing no quarter, he continued.

“Oh, oh! *Oh...*”

Relentlessly he drove her over the edge, then he pressed one of his dampened fingers against her tightest channel.

For a moment, she froze, her leg muscles tightening.

Hayes paused to look up, checking in with her. They hadn't specifically discussed anal penetration, but she hadn't mentioned it when they discussed her limits list.

“Keep going.”

Inexorably he pressed on.

“That's... *Yes.*” The word was a gentle plea.

Determined to give her the most powerful orgasm yet, he ruthlessly finger-fucked her ass and her pussy while still eating her.

In under thirty seconds, she screamed.

He'd never heard a sexier sound.

Crying out, whimpering, she continued to ride the wave until she eventually collapsed against the table, her body going limp. At that moment, he finally showed her mercy.

After ensuring her breathing was more regulated, he helped her to sit up. “I'd say you're about ready for me.”

“About...?” She blinked rapidly.

“If you need me to spend a little more time—”

“No.” Abigail pressed her hand to her heart. “I mean, no, Sir. Thank you, but absolutely not. I'm not sure I could take it. Every part of me either tingles or is on fire.”

That's what he wanted to hear. “As it should.” Their time together needed to be memorable.

So he could make love to her the way he wanted, they moved upstairs. Hayes took a moment to wash his hands, then donned a condom before stalking toward the bed.

Abigail smiled her appreciation. “Your body is gorgeous, Sir.” In silent invitation, she parted her thighs.

His desire intensifying, he knelt between her legs. Then he captured her wrists and pinned them above her head. Her nipples were swollen, and he took a moment to suck on them, and he used his free hand to pinch and tug. “Are you still sensitive from earlier?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good.” He hoped the movement of their bodies would create friction that magnified the eroticism of their lovemaking.

When she was writhing and crying out, he fisted his dick and placed his cockhead at her entrance.

“Please, Sir.”

Unable to wait any longer, he gently began to slide inside her.

She gasped, her body stiffening.

“We’ll go slow.”

“As I said, it’s been a while.”

He claimed her mouth in a passionate kiss, distracting her. Within the space of a couple of heartbeats, she began to relax. “We belong together, Abigail.”

“I’d like to hold onto you, Sir.”

Immediately he released her wrists, and she wrapped her arms around him.

“Excellent suggestion.” He trailed tiny kisses up the column of her throat until she started to moan.

She might be into impact play, but his tenderness seemed to bring her to even greater heights of pleasure.

Slowly she spread her legs a little farther apart, and he sank inside her feminine sheath in one final, powerful move.

“*This...*” She sighed. “It’s everything I hoped.”

For him as well.

They moved together as if they’d done this a hundred times on their way to a thousand more.

Her breaths became labored, turning into gasps.

“That’s it.”

Thrashing her head back and forth, Abigail lifted herself slightly, moving in perfect rhythm with his thrusts. “Sir! I’m so close.”

“Come for me, Abigail.”

She did, crying out, her pussy squeezing him, pushing him to the limits of his endurance. “You’re perfect.” *For me.* “In every way.”

Forcing himself to hold back his orgasm, he gritted his teeth. Finally, once she was finished riding hers, he came hard, exhaling in a primal groan.

Abigail stroked his back, nuzzling into the space between his shoulder and neck as if reluctant to end this union.

He had no intention of letting her go anytime soon.

Afraid of suffocating her, he rolled to the side but drew her against him.

“That was...” Exhaling, she traced tiny circles on his chest. “Amazing. Fantastic. Mind-blowing.”

“Keep going.”

“Has anyone told you you’re impossible?”

“Doesn’t sound familiar.”

She laughed. “Then allow me to be the first.”

They’d reached a level of comfort that he’d hadn’t known with anyone else.

After a few moments, he crossed to the bathroom to dispose of the protection, then returned to her. “How are you doing?”

She replied with a question of her own. “How many condoms do you have left?”

“Probably a dozen.” Stashed somewhere. That number wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough. First time he left the house, he’d pick up a few more boxes. “Do you have any preferences on how we use them?”

“I might, Sir.”

They spent the afternoon making love. He took her from behind. Later she suggested they try reverse cowboy.

As the sun headed toward the horizon and she was snuggled against him, her head on his chest, she confessed to feeling a little sore.

Her stamina surprised him. Obviously she craved his touch as much as he needed hers. That realization filled him with a ridiculous amount of masculine pride. “How about a bath?”

“You’re not ready for me to go home?”

“What do you think?” His cock was hard. Again. Or still. He wasn’t sure which. He couldn’t get enough of her.

She propped herself up and slid him a cheeky grin. “In that case, maybe I could stay a few more minutes.”

“Well, we do have a week’s worth of food that needs to be eaten.” And a movie to watch. Though he usually buried himself in work when Trenton was away, he’d be happy to spend an extended amount of time with Abigail.

Maybe he’d go all anti-scrooge and give his staff a couple of paid days off to finish shopping or whatever it was they needed to do in the few remaining days before Christmas.

When he shook his head to clear it, Abigail was regarding him.

“What are you thinking?”

“That maybe you’d enjoy a glass of wine while you take your bath.”

Her sigh was filled with pleasure and longing, and the gentle hint of a tease. “Are you trying to make me feel better so you can have your wicked way with me again, Sir?”

Drawing his eyebrows together, he captured her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “That might have been a stray thought, my charming sub.”

“*Stray?*” She laughed. “And since I’d like to have you inside me again, I accept your offer.”

If he were the type of man to have a Christmas wish, her responses would be on the top of his list. Still, he had regard for her needs. “Unless you’d rather eat first?”

“I’m not all that hungry yet.”

“Go ahead and take your bath. Red or white wine?”

“You’re spoiling me again.”

“Get used to it.”

“In that case, a chardonnay if you have it? It pairs well with spicier foods.” She grinned. “And life in general, now that I think of it.”

“Coming up.”

Hayes pulled on a pair of casual, lightweight pants and a long-sleeve shirt before jogging down the stairs.

The sound of running water reached him.

He enjoyed having her in his home. Now the challenge was figuring out how to keep her here.

In the kitchen, he poured them each a glass of wine, then took one upstairs to her.

Abigail had piled her hair on top of her head. He had no idea how she secured it there. Such were the mysteries of women.

Her head was tipped back, and her eyes were closed. Steam from the hot water billowed around her.

“One of the loveliest sights ever.”

With a small start, she sat up. As she swept her eyes over him, she smiled. “I agree.”

“Thank you.”

“I was talking about the wine, Sir.”

Holding the stemware out of reach, he crouched, cupped his free hand, and then splashed her with water. “Looking for a spanking later?”

She shrugged. “Might be.”

“That will have to wait until tomorrow since we’re having wine.”

“Is that a promise?”

“It is.” In this moment, he’d never been happier.

Downstairs, his phone rang. “I always check; in case it’s Trenton or Susanna.”

“Of course. Go.”

He dropped a quick kiss on the top of her head, then gave her the wine before hurrying to answer the summons.

Trenton. Immediately Hayes answered. “Hey, kiddo.”

“Daddy? I wanna come home.”

What the fuck? His heart galloped, and he did his best to rein it in. He needed to be cool-headed to find answers. But when it came to his son, Hayes often reacted from emotion. “What’s going on?”

“Are you talking to your Dad?” Susanna’s voice was in the background, drowning out anything Trenton may say.

A muffled conversation between the two ensued, ratcheting up Hayes’s impatience.

Finally Susanna was on the other end of the line. “Trenton doesn’t like it here. He and Duggie don’t get along. I’d come back with him, but we’re skiing tomorrow, and then we’re having dinner in town. I thought you could charter a flight for him and Bree.”

He couldn’t believe he was hearing this shit. She was planning to send the nanny instead of coming herself? “You can’t fucking fly home with your own son?”

“He’ll be fine. If you can arrange transportation, he can be home tonight or in the morning.”

“You selfish bitch.”

She exhaled her frustration. “The judge said no name calling, remember?”

The man would probably have a few choice words about her behavior as well.

“Let me know when I should have him ready to go.” She hung up on him.

Jesus. He picked up his own wineglass and hurled it against the wall. When he looked up, Abigail stood there, wearing one of his shirts, her hand pressed to her heart. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough to put the pieces together. Your son needs you. Nothing else matters.”

“Look...” He dragged a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, Abigail.” He crossed to her to take her in his arms. “I’ll be back soon.”

Though she looked up at him with a brave smile, doubt clouded her eyes, and he was helpless to do anything about it.

“I’ll catch a ride home.”

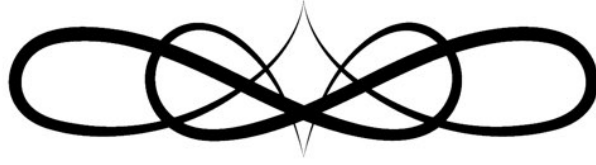
That he couldn’t allow. He owed it to her, to what they shared. “I’ll take you.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Go, Hayes. It’s the right thing to do.”

No matter how much it tore both of them apart on the inside. “Abigail...”

But she wrestled herself out of his arms and fled up the stairs, away from him.

CHAPTER SEVEN



By the time he touched down in Aspen, it was nearing ten o'clock. Picking up Trenton and his nanny took another hour or so. Even though he had a plane waiting, logistics took time.

Hayes considered spending the night, but since snow was in the forecast, he opted to get out of Colorado while he could.

Fortunately Trenton fell asleep while watching a cartoon. And that gave him a chance to chat with the nanny. Turned out staying in Colorado had also been a nightmare for Bree.

Evidently neither she nor Trenton had really left the house. Before the trip, Susanna promised Trenton ski lessons and to take him ice skating. But none of that happened. Seemed Duggie—as Susanna called him—didn't like having her kid around.

“They went out to lunch and dinner every day.”

“And you were left behind?”

She nodded. “They had friends over once. And they told me and Trenton to eat in the kitchen.”

Fury consumed him. No one deserved to be treated like that. “Damn it, Bree. I'm sorry.”

“I shouldn't say anything bad about my employer, but I'm glad Trenton wasn't there alone with just the two of them.”

“Look, take a few days off. Paid.”

“I won’t mind the break, if you’ll be okay without me. But I need to tell you something, Mr. McCall.”

“You’re not quitting? Tell me you’re not quitting.”

“No. Well, sort of. I’ll stay with you, but I won’t continue to work for Mrs. McCall.”

“Fair enough.” He planned to give Bree a holiday bonus. A large one.

“Let me know when you need me?”

“Thanks, Bree. You went above and beyond.”

He excused himself and made his way to the rear of the plane. Uncaring that it was the middle of the night back home, he called his lawyer. He wanted to get in front of the judge as soon as possible to adjust the custody arrangement.

When he took his seat again, sleep eluded him.

Now that his child was safe, his thoughts returned to the long-haired, blue-eyed beauty who’d captivated him and jolted him from his painful past.

Hayes could no longer imagine a future without her.

He sent a quick update to Abigail, but since it was so late, he didn’t expect an answer.

By the time the plane landed in New Orleans, it was nearing dawn. He dropped Bree at her house before driving home and tucking Trenton into bed.

An hour later, after a quick workout and a hot shower to unwind, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

He dreamed of Abigail and her vulnerable beauty.

Then, maybe because of the stress of the last twenty-four hours, nightmares plagued him. Images filtered through his mind of what he'd thought were happy times with his family. Other snapshots took their place, of Trenton being with Susanna and Doug miles away, and his son calling out for his father.

Hayes tossed and turned as a vortex pulled away his son, leaving Hayes alone in his office, staring into the bottom of a whiskey decanter.

The disturbing pictures were replaced with more soothing, potent ones—of Trenton smiling in front of a Christmas tree, eyes alight.

And there was Abigail—sassy sub, complex woman.

Cock hard, he came fully awake.

The dreams were so vivid that he didn't know which parts were real and which were pure fantasy.

He threw back the covers and raked a hand into his hair.

After checking on Trenton—who was sleeping peacefully—Hayes took a shower then made a full pot of coffee, determined to shove away the troubling aftereffects of his broken rest.

More clear-headed, he walked into his home office to send an email to his management staff. He informed them he was working from home and that they should take some time off.

Then he texted Abigail to ask how she was.

Even though it was Monday of Christmas week, his inbox was filled with dozens of year-end reports that needed attention.

“Daddy?”

Startled, Hayes looked up from the computer and smiled. “Hey, Kiddo.”

Rubbing his eyes and holding a stuffed bunny, Trenton walked in.

“Are you hungry?”

With a yawn, Trenton nodded. “Should I get some cereal?”

Hayes glanced at the clock and was surprised by how late it was. “Do you want to go to the pancake place?”

Trenton’s eyes lit up as Hayes had known they would. The place served them stacked high, loaded with chocolate chips and with a smiley face drawn with whipping cream. Thankfully they also had amazing frittatas and skillet dishes. And they poured a mean cup of coffee, something he was still in dire need of. “We can ride bikes.”

Half an hour later they were zipping through the park on their way to breakfast.

Fortunately they were able to get seated after only a short wait. Even though it was after breakfast and before lunch, it seemed a lot of people had the day off work.

On their way back home, Trenton pointed to a gazebo where Santa was seated. There was a short line of excited-looking kids waiting for their turn.

“Daddy, I need to tell Santa I’m back home. I’m afraid he won’t be able to find me.”

“You bet.” Then it occurred to him that his house didn’t look festive, and he had no presents for his son.

Since Susanna hadn’t planned to be in town for the holiday, Hayes had sent her money and told her to order a few

things from him. In last night's rush, he hadn't thought to pick up the gifts.

Now Christmas was almost here, and he was in danger of disappointing Trenton. The ultimate scrooge-y move.

He locked their bikes onto a nearby rack, and Trenton dashed away to join the line.

Quickly Hayes followed. After all, he needed to eavesdrop on his son's conversation with Saint Nick.

When Trenton sat on Santa's lap, the helper snapped photos. Seeing his son so happy after his upset yesterday made every penny of the portraits worth it.

"And what about you?" the helper asked after looking at his ring finger. "Do you have a Christmas wish?"

Unbidden, memories of his nightmares returned to taunt Hayes, and he blinked as if that would clear them.

With relentless determination, the flashbacks persisted.

He realized then how lonely and miserable he'd become, allowing bitterness to seep from his past into the present. Then he glanced at Trenton who was animatedly talking. Finally a possible future teased him. Did he have the courage to seize what his heart knew was right and also make someone else's dreams come true?

Aware of the woman still regarding him, he cleared his throat. "Sorry?"

"I was asking if you have a Christmas wish of your own?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Now very much focused on Christmas future, which was only two days away, he picked up his phone and pressed a

button. After all, what good was it to have an all-knowing chief of staff if he didn't use its supposedly magnificent powers?



Because it was the holidays and she was splurging, Abigail left her vehicle with the valet in front of the Maison Sterling.

The stand had a beautiful wreath on it, and the attendants were dressed in red shirts in honor of the season.

As she approached the garland-draped entrance, a man dressed in livery tipped his top hat and called out a holiday greeting as he pulled open the door for her.

“Thank you. And a merry Christmas to you, as well.”

No matter how many times she visited the hotel, its splendor took her breath away. But today its grandeur was made even more spectacular by a lighted tree that soared all the way to the ceiling. Boxes of all sizes were brightly wrapped with bows tied around them to look like presents, and there was a Santa's sleigh nearby that provided the photo opportunity. The entire display was social-media worthy.

Normally the cheerfulness would make her smile, but today the sight of the sleigh reminded her of the evening at the Quarter where Hayes first kissed her.

Though they'd only spent a short time together, his absence from her life was a stabbing pain through her heart.

Despite that, she squared her shoulders, determined to enjoy her time with Raven.

Abigail strode through the lobby, her heels echoing off the exquisite, polished marble floor.

She arrived at the bar, and it was already mostly filled. A lot of people had shopping bags. Still others were exchanging gifts. A time for family and friends.

Raven didn't seem to be here yet, so Abigail found an unoccupied table near the window where they could watch revelers heading down the street.

The hotel's festive décor extended to the bar area. Garland was artfully draped, and tiny white lights twinkled magically. A lit green candle flickered on the table, reflecting off the crystal bowl containing premium nuts.

In the far corner, a jazz trio played seasonal tunes.

A server stopped by to drop off a menu and place a napkin in front of her. He wore a tuxedo shirt with a bowtie and antlers bedazzled with rhinestones. "Do you need a minute? Or would you like to order?"

"I'm expecting a friend."

At that moment, Raven walked in, hair having escaped its bun, and exhaustion written in her eyes. No doubt she'd opened the shop yesterday and today as well. "There she is."

The server nodded. "I'll give you a minute to get settled."

"Thank you." Abigail stood to hug her friend.

"Wow. The Quarter is pure zaniness today. And I never thought I'd get out of work."

"It's a rough time of year for you."

She nodded. "I'm not going to complain though. It'll drop off in the first week of January. Then it will be a long, slow stretch until Mardi Gras."

They both sat, and Raven sighed. “Sorry. I dashed out without your hat.”

“That means we’ll have to get together again.”

Laughing, Raven picked up the menu. “Bless their creative little hearts. A White Christmas martini.”

“Oh?” Though Abigail had her sights set on a hurricane, she was intrigued.

“Lord, Lord. I’m going for the Candy Cane Christmas.”

“What’s that?”

Raven showed Abigail the front of the menu, bearing pictures of their specials. “The Candy Cane has heavy cream.” She looked up. “No half-and-half for the Maison Sterling.”

Grinning, they both simultaneously proclaimed, “It’s the holidays!”

A moment later, Raven went on. “So, evidently the inside of the glass is drizzled with syrup and has a Godiva chocolate in the bottom.”

This place was some version of heaven, she was sure.

“As if that wasn’t enough, there’s vanilla vodka, chocolate liqueur, crème de cacao, crème de menthe, and, well, of course, candy canes.”

It sounded heavenly. “How about the White Christmas one?”

“Much the same, but without the candy canes or crème de menthe.”

“No Godiva?”

“Or syrup swirl.”

Though that tempted her, the white one seemed more seasonal. “How about the best of both worlds? You order one; I’ll get the other. We can have a taste test.”

“Let’s do it. Then we know what to order for round two.”

Abigail laughed. “If I have more than one, I’ll either have to get a room here because I’m asleep, or I’ll have to catch an Uber home and pay a hundred dollars for leaving my car overnight.”

“You can always stay at my place.”

Which she had done once. Raven’s couch was so short and uncomfortable that Abigail’s back had hurt for days.

The server returned for their orders. Abigail considered herself lucky that he’d come back at all. Patrons were lined up in front of the bar, and the place was standing room only.

Raven moved her chair closer to Abigail’s so they didn’t have to shout at each other to be heard. At this point, the jazz music was no longer audible.

“So where is your piece of delicious holiday candy this evening?”

Abigail spooned a few nuts onto her napkin and popped a cashew into her mouth. “I’m not sure.”

“What?” Raven sat up straight. “Yesterday morning he looked as if he wanted to devour you.”

Abigail flushed. He’d definitely done that.

“You spent the day with him! I know you did. That grin gives you away. I want the details. *All* of them.”

Abigail shared the highlights, saying they’d scened and had lunch at Chaudière before going back to Hayes’s house.

But she kept the intimate parts to herself.

Their drinks arrived, interrupting the conversation.

Her martini glass was decorated with hand-painted holly and berries. The delectable concoction screamed winter, was deliciously thick and creamy, and packed a wallop. It was everything a cocktail should be.

Though Raven's was wonderful, Abigail was more than satisfied with her choice.

After a couple of sips, Raven circled back to their conversation. "Where were we? Oh, right. Master Christmas Wish took you back to his house. Then what happened?"

"It's kind of complicated."

"He didn't do a hump and dump, did he?" she demanded. "If he did—"

"No." Frantically Abigail shook her head. "He's not that type."

After lifting her glass, Raven regarded Abigail over the rim. "So where is he?"

Abigail filled in some of the missing parts, telling her friend about his ex-wife and son and what had happened in Aspen.

"She sounds like a bitch."

Which was essentially what Hayes had said.

"You haven't heard from him?"

"A couple of texts." He had to work, and he needed time with Trenton. Despite that, he'd insisted on driving her home yesterday evening before heading to the airport to catch his chartered flight. "Once again, I fell for a man with a family."

“Oh, honey. You were right; it is complicated. Give him time. Holidays can be hard.”

She nodded. “Most definitely.”

“He’s not selfish like Kevin.”

Had Raven read her mind? But Abigail was second-guessing herself. How well did she really know Hayes?

Not liking the uncertainty the internal question caused her, she refocused on her friend. “Are you going to your parents’ home on Wednesday for Christmas?”

“They’re expecting me. You’d be seriously doing me a favor if you came along. Maybe between the two of us we can distract them from their worry about why I don’t have a husband.”

She grinned.

The server returned to ask if they needed a second round.

Abigail shook her head. “No way. That had enough alcohol that I can’t feel my face.”

Raven laughed. “I’ll pass too.”

When the bill arrived, he also brought a small plate with two tiny cookies on it. They were round and dusted with powdered sugar. “Snowballs. Compliments of the coffee shop.”

Unable to resist, even though she was already full, Abigail picked up one and bit into the pecan-filled treat.

“You know, that may be the fancy seasonal name for them, but they’re really called Mexican wedding cookies.”

Abigail looked at her friend.

Raven shrugged. “I think it’s an omen meant for you.”

If only...



Trying to focus on others, rather than herself while battling the pangs of loneliness on Christmas eve, Abigail wrapped the plates of cookies that she'd prepared.

She planned to deliver them to neighbors in her apartment complex. And because she would still have dozens left, she decided to drop them off at the shelter where her friend, Maddie, volunteered.

After putting on a holiday fascinator, Abigail headed out to spread her holiday cheer.

Visiting with people lifted her spirits, and she was in a happy mood as she headed downtown.

Since the streets were quiet, she reached the shelter quickly and found nearby parking.

The director greeted her right away and happily accepted the bag full of cookies and the cash donation Abigail added.

“Bless you. And please remember, our clients appreciate the gifts all year round.”

She nodded. Being generous at Christmas was one thing, but need always existed.

Ironic. She'd talked to Hayes about the story of Scrooge. Through the story, the character evolved. Maybe she had room for growth herself.

Before leaving the building, she sent Maddie a text, offering to help out the next time her friend volunteered.

Afterward, she grabbed a coffee from a shop that was fairly quiet. No doubt the place bustled during the workday, but she was able to walk straight up to the counter. “How about a gingerbread macchiato?”

“Whipped cream?”

“Uhm...” She debated. Then decided it was a treat to herself. “How about extra?”

“You got it.”

The drink was everything she could hope for. Except for the fact she had no one to share it with.

As she was walking back to her car, her phone rang.

When she dug out the device from her purse and read the display, her pulse fluttered. *Hayes*.

Text messages with curt updates weren't really meaningful to her. But the fact he'd called on Christmas Eve meant the world to her—more so because she knew it was a special time for him and Trenton to bond.

Striving for a calmness she was nowhere close to feeling, she juggled her drink as she swiped the front of her phone to answer his call. “Hayes...?”

“I've dreamed of hearing you say my name like that, all breathless and sexy. Even better when you scream it.”

His words, his tone, his sexy implications were a potent aphrodisiac. She had to stop walking so she didn't drop her cup.

“I miss you, Abigail.”

“You too.” The admission was out before she could stop it.

“This is a lot to ask...”

For her to give him more space or time? That they only hook up when he was free to visit the club? Those were the fears that had prevented her from falling asleep last night.

“Trenton wants to make cookies.”

That was the last thing she expected him to say. “You could go to the market for the ones in the refrigerated section. You just unwrap them, slice, and bake.”

“This is one of the things he wants for Christmas.” He paused. “To leave out for Santa. Otherwise he won’t get any presents tonight. He was already fretting that his gifts would be delivered to the Aspen house.”

Poor kid. “You reassured him, right?”

“Trust you to worry about that. That’s one of the things I adore about you.”

One of the things?

“All this is a roundabout way of asking if you will make cookies with him.”

“What?” After the way Kevin had refused to allow her to engage with his kids...? “Are you sure that’s a good idea? He just had a bad experience with your ex’s boyfriend.”

“I told him you were a teacher and that your *cookies* are the best on the planet.”

Oh Lord. He’d laced the word with sensual inuendo.

“For now, he doesn’t need to know anything else. We can move slowly.”

But he’d offered a glimpse of a future she didn’t dare wish for.

Making cookies with him and his son might end up being more painful than anything else she'd experienced.

Should she chance it?

If she fell even deeper in love with Hayes, only to have him and Trenton disappear from her life, would she survive the heartbreak?

She sought out a park bench as her own realizations slammed into her.

Love?

When had she fallen in love with Hayes?

It might have been the most ridiculous thing she'd ever done. After all, he probably wouldn't return the emotion.

"Abigail? Are you still there?"

She couldn't find her voice.

"Look... I apologize if I asked too much of you."

Had he? Yes, it was a lot. *Too much?* She considered that.

Maybe she could spend time with them if she erected emotional boundaries. "I'm here."

"It was just an idea. We'll go to the market like you suggested."

"No. Do you want me to come over?" On second thought, that would be a nightmare. It meant packing up her rolling pin, baking sheets, cookie cutters, along with the ingredients and her trusty stand mixer.

"You'll do it? It's a Christmas dream come true."

She laughed. "Do you mind bringing Trenton to my place since I have everything I need there?"

“What time do you want us?”

Abigail frowned. “Were you angling for that all along?”

“Ah...”

His soft chuckle reached her, melting her. It was as if he knew the code to unlock all of her responses.

“Busted. Turns out elves need time to work some magic at my place.”

“So this is a convenience for you? Your way to get out for a few hours and—”

“Absolutely not, Abigail. I could take him shopping or to a movie, maybe for a pizza. This is about you and my desire to spend time together.”

She exhaled. His genuine warmth soothed her. “I need half an hour to get home.”

“Am I interrupting something?”

“I was making a cookie delivery to the shelter.”

“That was thoughtful.”

“Turns out we can all be a little less scrooge-y.”

“About that...” He broke off. “We’ll talk later.”

Since time was ticking, she hurried home

When they arrived, Abigail had already set out the things they needed to start baking.

Hayes offered a quick hug, and he squeezed her ass while Trenton was distracted with her tree.

Extracting herself from Hayes’s grip while she was still capable of it, she offered her hand to Trenton. “Nice to meet you. I’m Abigail.”

After looking at his Dad for guidance, Trenton shook her hand.

“I hear you want to make cookies. Any particular kind?”

“Chocolate chip.” His answer was immediate.

“Those are his favorite.” Hayes shrugged. “What does Santa like?”

Abigail responded for him. “I’m told he likes chocolate chip the best.”

“See, Daddy?”

She had Trenton help measure the ingredients and turn on the mixer. Surprising her, Hayes perched on a stool at the kitchen island, watching everything.

When the first trays were in the oven, she instructed her very simple device to load her favorite holiday album. Then she changed her mind and grinned. “Play “Jingle Bells” by Alvin and the Chipmunks.”

Hayes frantically shook his head, “Anything but that.”

But Trenton joined in when she started to sing.

After the cookies came out, but before the chocolate chips totally cooled, both boys reached for one. With a sigh, she poured each of them a glass of milk to cool their mouths.

She and Trenton moved on to sugar cookies, and she placed the dough in the refrigerator to chill before making her next suggestion. “How about snowballs?”

“What are those?” Trenton asked.

The Mexican wedding cookies she’d had at the Maison Sterling. She explained the concept to Trenton and showed him pictures on her phone.

“I think Santa will like those.”

“What do you think?” she asked Hayes.

“I think I know what other name they go by.”

Their gazes met, and longing was in the depths of his jewel-like green eyes.

Suddenly shaking, she turned away to pull out a bag of pecans.

While that batch baked, Trenton announced he was hungry.

“How about pizza?” Hayes suggested.

An animated discussion about what toppings to order ensued. And in the end, he ordered three different pies, wings, and sugary soda.

If father and son weren't in a food coma by the end of the night, she'd be shocked.

They spent the day baking and watching movies together...a glimpse of the life she'd always imagined.

And at the end of the evening, when Trenton fell asleep on the couch, she walked into the kitchen to package up the cookies for them and Santa. Hayes stalked toward her, intent obvious, and backed her into the corner to claim her mouth in a passionate kiss.

“Come over tomorrow?”

“Hayes...” Today was bad enough. Them leaving now was horrible, and a lump formed in her throat. She adored Trenton, finding him inquisitive and smart. But she knew she wasn't part of their family unit.

“My chief of staff arranged for enough food for three people.”

“You need time with Trenton.”

“He likes you. Say yes.”

Was it better than being alone?

“I’m going to make pancakes.”

“You?” she echoed. “Making pancakes?”

He sighed. “Fine. I’m going to try. I have a mix. Foolproof, right?”

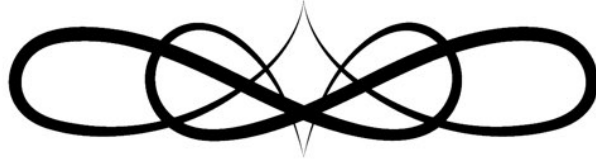
Maybe.

“And coffee. Maybe dunk some cookies in it.”

She laughed. “Your offer is irresistible.”

He kissed her again, then summoned the car. He carried the packages down, then came back to scoop up his still-sleeping son. With a gentle smile, Hayes left for the night. Again she was alone, and her heart echoed with emptiness.

CHAPTER EIGHT



“Miss Abigail, Santa left a gift for you!”

“He did?” She hadn’t even had a chance to ring the bell before Trenton threw open the front door.

His enthusiastic greeting filled her with joy.

Hayes hurried over to stand behind him. “He couldn’t wait for you to get here.”

“What did you bring?” Trenton demanded.

“A few things,” she hedged.

Hayes smiled. “Now that you’re here, we have everything we need.”

Abigail was doubly glad she hadn’t decided to stay home. Even if the future was bleak, she could replay these happy moments forever.

“Santa ate all his cookies!”

“Did he?” She looked at Hayes.

“Every last one of them.”

“Good thing Santa likes to exercise,” she said.

“He has some preferred methods of cardio.”

Heat rushed through her.

“How about we let our guest inside?” he suggested to his son.

Trenton moved back.

“Can I take that for you?” Hayes extended a hand to accept her bag.

She’d brought eggnog, two different kinds of alcohol, ingredients to make hot cocoa, and a surprise for Trenton.

Once she was in the foyer with her bag and purse on a nearby table, Trenton slammed the door closed. Though Hayes winced at the sound and the way the glass next to it jumped, he said nothing.

From the living room, noise blared.

“It’s a little chaotic,” Hayes said by way of apology. “Kiddo, go turn down the volume, please.”

“But it’s ‘Frosty,’ Daddy!”

“I think you’ll be okay if you’re close enough.” He shrugged. “Meaning within a neighboring state.”

Trenton scampered off, and Hayes seized the moment to wrap her in his arms. His hard cock pressed into her soft belly, awakening arousal, making her tremble.

“I’m ready for you to submit to me.”

So was she. “Yes...”

“Miss Abigail! You have to see what Santa brought me.”

“I’d tell him to let you get settled first, but I don’t think it would work.”

“Definitely not on Christmas morning.”

Taking her hand, Hayes led her into the living room.

In the few short days since she'd been here, there'd been an explosion of frivolity.

A massive tree flirted with the ceiling. Wrapping paper lay in shreds. Toys, books, puzzles, plastic building blocks, and even a new Bonds device were haphazardly on the couch, coffee table, even the floor.

Surprised, she looked at Hayes. "This was a lot to put together in a short time."

"My chief of staff came in handy."

"And you said he—she?—even arranged for the meal?"

He nodded.

"I'd say everything is perfect."

"Please leave us a five-star review, Abigail."

She and Hayes exchanged grins, but Trenton piped up. "It's Miss Abigail."

"Thank you, young man."

Abigail laughed. "So much for us outsmarting a computer."

"Chief of staff, if you please, ma'am."

"I stand corrected."

Abigail grabbed the bag from the foyer and put the eggnog in the fridge and lined up the bottles of brandy and bourbon on the counter.

"Now can we have breakfast?" Trenton asked before going immediately back to the television.

"I made him wait until you got here."

Hayes cooked—messily and with minimum competence—but he wouldn't allow her to help. Instead he poured her a cup of coffee and hummed while he prepared the meal. Then he called out to Trenton. "Hey, kiddo? Come set the table, please."

All of a sudden, he didn't seem to be able to hear his father, making her grin.

"I'll make you turn off the TV."

"Coming, Daddy!"

Their exchange—and undeniable bond—filled her heart with happiness.

Finally the pancakes were ready, and some of them were almost burned. But the bacon he'd cooked in the oven was crisp, and the scrambled eggs weren't too dry. Still, since she didn't have to cook, the meal was perfect.

Sitting down to eat at the same table where Hayes had so recently devoured her made her blush.

After breakfast, she insisted on helping to clean the kitchen, and Hayes filled in the details about his trip to Aspen, including the way Trenton had been excluded from all the activities between his mom and Duggie.

"She hasn't called him once."

Refusing to say anything bad about the ex, she wiped her hands dry. "He has you."

Abigail glanced into the living room. Trenton was on his stomach on the couch, playing a game on his new electronic pad. "I'd say he seems happy and very well-adjusted."

"Hearing you say that means the world."

Once the kitchen was tidy, they rejoined Trenton, and she sat near him. “If you look in the bag that I brought, you might find something that Santa left at my house for you.”

“Really?” With the raw enthusiasm only children seemed to show, he dashed over to the counter to fetch it. Then he returned to the couch to rip open the package.

“Oh! Wow.” He tore apart the box to take out the scientist set, complete with microscope, binoculars, and a bug collection kit.

Above his son’s head, Hayes mouthed, “Thank you.”

“Can we go out to the park, Daddy? I want to ‘splore nature.”

Since a walk would be great after all that food, she joined them.

When they got back, Trenton fell asleep.

“He was awake before dawn.”

She and Hayes snuggled on the couch, sipping some spiked eggnog. Then as the afternoon drew on, she suggested they get dinner going. Breakfast had worn off some time ago.

He texted her the instructions that the chief of staff had sent.

Seemed straightforward enough to reheat everything, including the prime rib. “This is my new favorite way of doing Christmas dinner.”

“I figured it was either this or making reservations.”

While everything baked or simmered, he led her back into the living room. Then Hayes crouched to grab a small gift bag that was hidden at the back of the tree.

“You didn’t need to get me anything.”

“It’s something I hope you like.” He offered the present to her.

With abandon, she pulled out the tissue paper and found a small box inside. Eyes wide, breath in her throat, unable to comprehend what she was seeing, she pulled it out. “Hayes...?”

“Open it.”

When she did, a massive diamond winked in the overhead light.

She looked at him, and he was watching her intently. “I...”
Don’t know what to think. How to act.

“Abigail Chapman, will you do me the honor of spending the rest of your life with me?”

Tears filled her eyes, then spilled down her cheeks.

“I know it’s fast. But my entire life, I’ve wanted a woman with integrity who is generous and loving with a heart big enough to embrace me and those I love. I know you’re that woman. My perfect match.”

She didn’t know what to say. Sincerity was etched in his eyes.

“If you say yes, I swear I will spend the rest of my life trying to make you happy.”

“We’re...” Her voice cracked. Though her dreams were within reach, common sense screamed a warning. They were too different, and it wouldn’t work. “From different worlds.”

He shook his head. “We’re not. The same things matter to both of us.”

“Your money puts you in rarefied space.”

“It means we’ll have more choices. But it hasn’t changed me. It won’t change you.”

For every objection, he had an answer.

“You’re a Titan.” Last night after he and Trenton left, she’d been restless, and she had googled the organization.

“And a lot of the information you probably found is conjecture and hyperbole.”

Even if a tenth of it was true, he belonged to one of the most powerful organizations on the planet.

Still the ring in the box winked at her. And she was reminded that there was more than just her and Hayes to consider here. “We can’t forget about Trenton.”

“I never would. And neither would you. For crying out loud, you brought him a present, which is a hell of a lot more than his bio mom did for him.”

Abigail shook her head. “This isn’t about her. I’m concerned about him and how he will react to having someone else in your life.”

“This morning, he asked about you. I was honest and told him that I care about you and would like to keep seeing you.”

As she waited for him to go on, she pressed her lips together.

“He said okay and went to watch cartoons.”

Through the emotion washing over her, she laughed. “You’re not making that up?”

“My son’s well-being is the top of my list.”

Of course it was, and she respected that. “We all need time. Especially Trenton.”

“Is this a yes?”

“It’s...” Was it?

“I’ll wait as long as it takes. Prove myself to you. Show you I’m worthy of your love and commitment. Earn your trust, enough so that you’ll consider having children with me.”

She was grateful he hadn’t touched her. If he had, resistance would have melted, and she needed her wits about her.

“You talked to me about Scrooge. Then I had dreams, nightmares. The thing that terrified me the most was the idea of a future without you in it.”

Had anyone ever affected her like he did?

“It made me realize I love you, Abigail.”

“You...?” *Love me?*

Hayes lowered himself to one knee, took her hand, and then eased the ring from the velvet pillow where it was nestled. He held her gaze, and when he spoke, his voice was calm and rich with confidence. “Abigail, will you have me? Will you marry me?”

Shaking, crying, trembling, she accepted. “I love you, Hayes. Yes. A hundred thousand yesses.”

He slid the ring onto her finger, and the fit was perfect, as if it were meant to be, as if it had always been there.

After he stood, he drew her into his arms and kissed her deeply and possessively. “Wife. Submissive.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He was still holding her when Trenton came down the stairs. "I'm hungry."

She took a step back from Hayes and smiled. *Family*. Complete with interruptions. This was exactly what she wanted.

Hayes cleared his throat and straightened his cuffs. "Dinner's about ready."

Instead of eating in the formal dining room, they opted to eat in the living room in front of the TV. All three of them sat on the couch, Hayes in the middle.

"Anyone up for a Christmas movie?"

She and Trenton exchanged glances and then nodded.

"Chief of Staff? Play the movie *A Christmas Carol*."

Without argument, the opening credits appeared on the screen.

"Merry Christmas to you, your lordship."

They all settled in to watch the miser's miraculous transformation.

Later that night, after Trenton was in bed, and she and Hayes were on the couch in front of the twinkling tree, he looked at her. "Now it's time for my Christmas wish to come true." He released the top button of her blouse.

"How strange is that, Sir? Turns out my wish has just come true as well."

Once more he kissed her before sweeping her up and carrying her to the bedroom where they would soon be sharing the rest of their lives together.



QUARTER
HOLIDAYS
TITANS

HIS CHRISTMAS

Wife

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CHAPTER ONE



Finally.

At nearly nine fifteen on the Saturday before Christmas, Kaylee Robbins's asshole boss finally left the office. Blowing out a relieved breath, she shoved aside the file she'd been working on. It wasn't bad enough that he seemed to have unlimited focus and energy, but he demanded the same from her. Working fourteen-hour days was the norm, and he expected her to show up for at least half of the weekend.

She didn't complain—at least not to his face. Unlike the scores of people he'd fired the first day he'd walked through the door, she still had a job.

But now that he was gone, she could get ready to head to the Quarter, New Orleans's premier BDSM club, where she could find a hot Dominant to scene with and forget all about Evan Frost.

Evan Frost. With his icy blue eyes and chilling demeanor, could there be a more perfect name for a tyrant like him?

She spent the next half hour wrapping up her day, straightening her desk, closing the computer programs she'd been working on, locking up her files, and leaving herself notes so she could hit the ground running at seven o'clock on Monday morning.

After grabbing her purse, tote, and the garment bag that hung from a hook behind her door, she left her office and entered the reception area.

An unlit Christmas tree stood in one corner. The sad star on top leaned to one side, and a shattered glass ornament lay on the hardwood floor—all seeming to sum up the holiday spirit at Christoff Investments.

Aware of time ticking, she caught the elevator to the fourteenth-floor fitness center. Not that she ever had time—or the inclination—to work out, but the locker room was beautiful, more fitting for a spa than an office building.

Once she'd freshened her hair and makeup, she crossed to one of the changing rooms to slip into her red elf costume with its hood and white faux fur accents. Although the skirt was ridiculously short, the A-line cut flattered her figure.

If her Christmas wishes came true this evening, she would capture the interest of Santa, played by Master Denton. Big and burly—and wicked with a flogger—the Dominant was perfect for the role. They'd scened together a couple of times in the past, and she'd love the opportunity for an encore performance in a few hours. A good spanking from a skilled hand would banish her stress and hopefully allow her to sleep well tonight.

Anxious to get going, she gathered her belongings. Then, phone in hand, she opened the app that would summon a vehicle to spirit her to the French Quarter. She pushed open the door, only to plow into an unyielding, solid mass.

As the breath whooshed from her lungs, she lost her balance, and strong hands landed on her shoulders to steady her.

“Well, well, Ms. Robbins.”

Stunned, she looked up at her boss. *No*. She shook her head. This couldn't be happening.

Frost's black hair was damp as if he was fresh from the shower. He'd ditched his usual suit in favor of a white shirt, unbuttoned at the throat. The sleeves had been turned back to reveal his strong forearms, and his dress slacks were tailored so tightly as to be scandalous.

His face—one that could have been chiseled from granite—was freshly shaven. And Lord save her, he smelled of spice and invitation.

What was wrong with her? The collision hadn't just left her stunned; it made her thoughts reel.

Still imprisoning her, he swept his gaze down her, and when he met her eyes, the usual glacial ice had vanished from his, replaced by something she didn't recognize. *Interest, maybe?*

Why was her mouth suddenly dry? And why was she still standing so close to him?

“Are you going somewhere, Ms. Robbins?”

In her usual crisp and professional manner, she replied with a question of her own. “If you'll excuse me?” Technically she was off the clock. Even if she wasn't, she owed him zero explanation about what she did in her free time. With fierce resolve, she shrugged out of his grip and took a step back.

“Enjoy your weekend,” he said.

“Or the small part that's left of it.” She turned to stride away, aware of his heated gaze watching her.

In the silence, her heels tapped a frantic rhythm on the tiles, matching the pounding of her pulse. *Please stay where you are. Or take the stairs.*

Of course he did no such thing.

His footsteps like thunderbolts, he devoured the distance between them. “Allow me.” He reached around her to press the elevator call button. “It’s late. Can I walk you to your car?”

Narrowing her gaze, she looked over her shoulder at him. *Who are you?* Someone had clearly taken over his body and infused it with some human consideration. “I didn’t drive.”

He stood next to her, closer than comfortable. “I’m happy to drop you somewhere.”

“I have a ride coming.” And she definitely didn’t want Frost to know she was going to their BDSM club.

The compartment’s doors opened, and he turned up a palm, inviting her to precede him inside.

“I forgot something in my office.” The lie fell from her lips as easily as it did desperately.

“Ah.”

As she pressed the UP button, he nodded. “I see.”

“Good night, Mr. Frost.”

“Remain in the lobby until your vehicle arrives.”

Her late hours had never bothered him before. At least to his credit, one of his first acts after taking over as CEO was to instruct security to ensure people made it to their cars safely if it was dark outside. And she was able to park nearby on the days she drove herself.

Once she was safely back upstairs, she collapsed into the chair behind her desk.

Her shoulders still tingled from the memory of his touch, and her breath rushed out in frantic bursts.

What the heck had happened on the fourteenth floor? And more, why had her nemesis impacted her so profoundly?

Until now, their exchanges had been limited to work-related themes, so much so that it didn't occur to her to wonder what he did after hours. And she'd certainly never considered him to be anything other than an overbearing tyrant.

When her fingers stopped trembling and she was able to shake off the aftereffects of the unwelcome exchange, she forced herself to refocus.

Running into Frost and coming back upstairs cost her time she didn't really have. Mistress Aviana, the club's owner, had requested that Kaylee arrive no later than ten thirty. At this rate, she'd be lucky to get there by eleven.

With a sigh, she picked up her phone to continue summoning a ride.

Eventually, praying Frost had left the premises, she returned to the bank of elevators. Hyperaware of every sound, she paced. The boss hole would never again catch her off guard.

A few minutes later, her vehicle arrived, and soon the sedan threaded its way through the preholiday revelers spilling from bars and into the French Quarter's streets.

Because the journey had been so slow and harrowing, she doubled the driver's usual tip.

Clutching her bag and purse against her body, Kaylee hurried to a nondescript green door and pressed a bell. After saying her name, she looked into the camera.

Seconds later, a soft click indicated the lock had been released. The moment she slipped inside, a loud, techno version of “Joy to the World” reverberated off the walls.

Definitely not an ordinary party.

For the first time all day, she exhaled, then, feeling decidedly more festive, she climbed onto the first step. In honor of the season, twinkling lights and garland were wrapped around the staircase banister and spindles.

When she reached the check-in area, Trinity, the receptionist, smiled and slid a pen and paper in her direction.

At that moment, her friend Maddie walked over, carrying drinks with lidded cups.

“We appreciate you doing this,” Trinity told Kaylee. “Master Evan is waiting for you at the coat check.”

What? Her thoughts plowed into one another, and she froze. It couldn’t be. But a program on the table listed Evan Frost as Santa.

Could the floor please open up and swallow her? “Master Evan?” The question emerged as a squeak, rather than in her usual no-nonsense tone.

“Yes. He’s filling in tonight because of an unexpected emergency.” Trinity tipped her head to the side. “Is that a problem?”

On every level. How had this happened? And worse, did he know? “He’s my boss.”

“I’m sorry.” Trinity sighed. “I had no idea.”

The Quarter honored their members' privacy, and many attendees used scene names. Unless both parties agreed, there was no acknowledgment of relationships outside of the club walls.

“No worries.” In her customary way, Trinity went into problem-solving mode. “I’ll find someone to fill in for you.” She glanced at Maddie. “You’re about the same size as Kaylee, but you’ve already been working more hours than I’d like.”

Just then the boss hole himself pushed through the frosted glass door with its beautifully etched fleur-de-lis that separated the reception and foyer areas from the rest of the club.

Kaylee’s heart slammed into her throat.

Outside the fitness center, he’d been overwhelming. But now he was all-consuming. He’d changed into red pants that were tucked into large boots, and he’d donned a Santa hat. Not only that, but he was shirtless—showing off his massive chest and biceps, not to mention his honed abs.

The sight of his half-naked body made her mouth fall open.

Traitorous hormones.

Full of confidence and purpose, gaze focused on her, he walked to the check-in desk. “Something wrong?”

Trinity shook her head. “I wasn’t aware of certain facts, so we’re just sorting out options.”

“Ah.” He directed his attention to Kaylee. “May I have a word with you, Ms. Robbins?”

Trinity shook her head. “Not without her consent.”

“It’s okay.” Kaylee forced a small grin that she hoped didn’t come out as the grimace she was fighting back. “I deal with him all day.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to while you’re here.” Trinity’s voice held a protective note.

“I appreciate that.”

Since another group of people were behind her, Kaylee rounded the table to join Frost. No way was she even thinking of him as *Master Evan*.

So why were her shoulders once again warm where he’d gripped her earlier?

He drew her to one side, near the vendor booths that seemed to be doing a brisk business.

“Look, Ms. Robbins—”

“Did you know?”

“That you were going to be my helper? No. Trinity called me and asked me to fill in this afternoon. But I didn’t realize you were meant to be my elf until Aviana mentioned it a few minutes ago.”

At least he’d had some warning, unlike her. But of course, ordering her around after hours wouldn’t be a problem at all for him.

The world spun beneath her. Facing him well over seventy hours a week was more than enough for her. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“No?”

“On second thought, I will ask Trinity to have someone switch with me.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Afraid?” Kaylee angled her chin up to meet his enigmatic eyes. “You misunderstand. You don’t scare me.” *Well, maybe a little bit.*

Then suddenly, thoughts she’d been thinking—holding back for months—tumbled out of her mouth. “It’s more that I don’t like you.” She clamped her lips together. That had been rash, and it might cost her the job she desperately needed.

“And?” Frost didn’t blink. “What has that got to do with anything?”

“You don’t care?” She’d wondered if the infuriating man had a heart or conscience. Now she had her answer. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“We have a job to do.”

“A volunteer one.” She refused to look away. “Someone else can put up with you for the next couple of hours. I’ll be more than happy to spend time elsewhere.” Working at the check-in desk or waiting tables at the bar was preferable to staring at his half-naked body all night.

“Look...” He raked a hand into his hair.

Frustration? Annoyance? But the betrayal of any emotion shocked her.

“You know it would be a challenge to change things this late in the game.”

She agreed, and generally she hated to inconvenience others.

“I’ll give you the week off that you want.”

Bastard. He knew how much she wanted to go to her sister's wedding. Her unsigned vacation request form was sitting on his desk, mocking her every time she entered his office. "How dare you use our professional relationship to get what you want?"

"Paid."

She gaped. *That*, she hadn't expected. With her stepfather's lingering illness, then death earlier in the year, she'd spent a lot of time with her family and burned through all her allotted personal time off. And all of that had happened before he'd taken over. "I don't have the leave accrued for that."

"We'll consider it compensation for all the extra hours."

"I'm not on salary." If she didn't receive extra pay for all the hours she put in, she wouldn't have stayed at Christoff Investments.

He waved a hand as if details didn't matter to him—which they probably didn't. Unlike other mortals, the man got everything that he wanted.

"I'll sweeten the pot by adding a first-class airline ticket."

Meaning she could travel with a glass of champagne in hand and stretch out her legs? Had the holiday season suddenly made him lose his mind? That wasn't possible. Three hours ago, he'd been as demanding as always. Which meant he had ulterior motives. Scowling, she called him out on her suspicions. "What's the catch?"

"I need a wife for Christmas Eve dinner at my grandmother's house."

"You need a..." She shook her head to clear it. Since the club's music was so loud, she told herself she'd misheard him.

“What?”

“Wife.”

She could have sworn a smile toyed with the corners of his mouth, but since she’d never seen him reveal a hint of emotion, she wasn’t sure. “I’m lost. What does this have to do with me?”

“We can help each other out.”

She frowned. “You want me to...?” *Marry you?*

“Be my fake bride for the holidays. It entails having dinner on Christmas Eve at my grandmother’s house. You don’t have other plans?”

The fact her family celebrated on Christmas Day was beside the point.

“I’d also expect you to act as my hostess for a New Year’s Eve party as Gran will be there.”

The evening had gone from untenable to horrific. Tipping her head to the side, she regarded him. “I don’t understand.”

He waited for her to expand.

“What do you need a wife for? And why me?”

As if trying to contain his annoyance, he waved. “Gran believes I’m married. It was easier that way.”

“Until your lies caught up to you?”

Frost’s nostrils flared. “There were reasons.” His clipped tone warned her to watch her step. “As for the second half of your question, because I’m not dating anyone and don’t have time to find someone suitable.”

The fact he found her suitable on any level surprised her.

“We work together, and that covers how I met you. Can you do it?” He leaned in closer, overwhelming her senses with the sight of his naked torso. “Pretend for a few hours?”

“No.” Frantically she shook her head. *Positively, absolutely not.*

But this was Frost she was talking to. And he might as well be a brick wall.

As if she’d never said a word, he continued. “If you calculate the cost you’ll be earning per hour, you’ll find the compensation to be more than adequate. Generous, even.”

Since he was being ridiculous, she followed suit. “When you say paid vacation, are you talking about a standard forty-hour workweek? Or the time you demand that I put in?”

His eyes flashed with fire. “You’re asking for sixty hours of compensation in addition to the airfare?”

I’m negotiating with him? Exhaustion had no doubt made her as delusional as he was. His suggestion was beyond absurd, and she should respond in one of two ways: no, or hell no. “Actually, I’m not asking for that at all.” Still, she and her family desperately needed the money, which was why she was still listening. “I want to be paid for the actual hours I put in, which is more than seventy, and you know it.”

“Done.” He stuck out his hand for her to shake.

Pointedly she ignored it. This couldn’t be happening. And what else would he have agreed to in order to get her to go along with his farce?

“You made a deal.”

“I did no such thing.”

“Seventy hours of pay for the week you’re gone, plus a first-class airline ticket.”

It was the kind of Christmas gift she’d been fantasizing about, but she was a grown-up now who knew how costly that would be.

“And since you’re not afraid of me—or so you insist—you’ll also fulfill your obligation to be my assistant for the night.”

As he’d no doubt intended, his pointed barb found its mark. “Just when I thought you couldn’t be a bigger asshole.”

Ignoring her, he went on. “Meet me back here before midnight so we can get the bag ready.”

She preferred his businesslike attitude. It was much better—*safer*—than thinking about showing up for his family dinner.

“Aviana has a surprise in store.”

Members had been speculating for months on what the owner might be planning.

“We will be bringing up the rear of the parade, right after Aviana and the rest of her court.”

She has royalty?

“As I understand it, we’ll be making three trips through the dungeon, and then there will be a receiving line.”

Even for Mistress Aviana, the event sounded extravagant.

“After that, I’ll be handing out gifts while you manage the crowd.”

All members had been asked to bring a wrapped present for Santa’s bag.

“Fine.” Sounded easy enough.

Now that he was evidently done speaking, she turned away, seizing the opportunity to escape. After all, she still needed to change into her elf shoes and hat, and now she had completely run out of time to get herself ready.

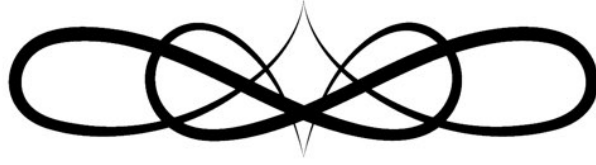
“Ms. Robbins.”

The snap of command in his voice made her freeze in place.

“Perhaps I can convince you I’m not an asshole after all.”

She glanced over her shoulder to offer him a huge, fake smile. “That would take much more than a Christmas miracle, Mr. Frost.”

CHAPTER TWO



Her heart still hammering at the prospect of spending so much time with Frost tonight and then over the holidays in a pretend marriage, Kaylee hurried into the small locker room to change out of her heels and into the outrageous elf shoes and hat that matched her costume.

After repacking her belongings, she headed for the coat check.

“Did you remember to bring a gift?” the volunteer asked.

With a nod, Kaylee pulled the wrapped leather handcuffs from a pocket inside her tote. When she’d gone shopping, she’d fantasized about Master Denton securing her with them. But now that she was no longer planning to scene, she sighed. Until now she’d had no idea how much she had been counting on that stress relief.

The woman deposited the present into a big, white sack.

Next, Kaylee turned over her tote with her purse and garment bag inside.

“Anything else?”

“That’s it. Thanks.” Kaylee turned and spotted her friend, Abigail, working at a shop in the vendor area.

A man was lacing a woman into a black satin corset accented with rhinestones, leaving Abigail free to chat, at least for the moment.

“Did you hear?” Kaylee asked.

Abigail frowned. “No.”

“Asshole Frost is filling in as Santa. And I’m his helper.”

“Oh no.” Abigail scowled furiously. “That has to be a nightmare. Can you get someone else to do it?”

“I would, except...” Glancing around, Kaylee blew out a breath. “He knows how much I want to go to my sister’s wedding. So he promised me the time off, with pay. And he bought me the plane ticket. First class.” But she couldn’t admit the rest. Her friend would insist she not go along with Frost’s fake-marriage idea. But even Abigail didn’t know the full extent of Kaylee’s financial situation or her desperation.

“He’s still an asshole.”

Abigail was loyal to a fault, and Kaylee appreciated it. “He knows my weak spots.” As she often said, Machiavelli had nothing on Evan Frost.

“Let’s go have a drink after Christmas and talk about him.”

Kaylee appreciated her friend’s suggestion. “I’m in.” No doubt she’d have plenty to talk about by then. She gave her first real smile of the evening. “Anyway, I need to meet up with the jerk so we can get Santa’s bag ready.” With a quick wave, she headed down the hallway.

Around her, the vendor fair was closing, and dungeon monitors issued orders that walkways needed to be cleared.

Prompt and impatient as always, Frost waited for her.

Near him, she was even more keenly aware of their size difference. At work, she wore sensible heels and slim-fitting skirts or tailored slacks—maybe as some sort of armor. Right now, she felt slightly vulnerable.

“Come with me.”

Curious, she followed him into the dungeon and behind a black screen. A row of seats were arranged in a straight line, and Mistress Aviana’s throne was elevated on a dais. Nearby, in an open area near a towering tree, loomed a plush, velvet-covered armchair. No doubt that was intended for Santa.

Within moments, a volunteer brought over the massive sack and placed it where Frost could easily reach inside.

“Do you want to watch what happens next from the dungeon?”

Near his half-naked body? And risk being jostled into him by the sheer number of people in attendance? “I saw a television monitor in the vendor area. I’ll watch from there.” Away from the Saint Andrew’s crosses and spanking benches.

“Of course.” His voice held a slightly mocking tone, as if he was challenging her assertion that she wasn’t afraid of him.

Refusing to be goaded, she walked away. Not surprisingly, he followed her.

In the time they’d been gone, the area had emptied out. Even the check-in desk appeared to have been shut down.

Moments later, the lights flickered three times, then dimmed. Mid-song, the music abruptly stopped, and the club thundered with an expectant silence.

Despite herself, she looked at Frost, and he shook his head. “I don’t know anything more than you do.”

Maybe she should have watched from inside the dungeon.

Noise behind them caught Kaylee's attention, and she glanced over her shoulder to see a sleigh being pulled into the area.

For Santa?

On the wall, the monitor blinked to life just as the startling sound of a trumpet blast reverberated from a nearby speaker.

A camera focused on the balcony that was halfway between the second-floor private rooms and the dungeon. Almost instantly, a crier appeared, wearing garb that could have come from medieval times.

"Hear ye; hear ye!" After a short, dramatic pause, he continued. "Tonight, we present to you the royal court." With a great dramatic flair, he extended his arm and pointed to the top of the stairs.

Wearing a cloak, Trinity descended, stopping to curtsy and wave from the landing.

Aviana's Dungeon Master, Tore, was next. The man was massive, straining the seams of his black vest.

Just then, having finished her descent of the staircase, Trinity pushed through the door to join Kaylee and Frost and to line up for the parade.

"That was something," Frost observed.

Trinity grinned. "Milady does enjoy a spectacle."

With every event, she continued to raise the bar. Rumor had it, she consulted with a Hollywood producer to brainstorm her ideas. From what Kaylee had seen so far, she believed it.

On the small screen, Master Mason and Hannah, his very pregnant wife, descended. Earlier in the year, the Dominant had made a significant donation to Aviana's favorite charity—by way of the slave auction where he won a weekend with Hannah, who was now his bride. So it didn't surprise Kaylee that they were part of the royal entourage.

As the chief dungeon master joined Trinity, billionaire hotel magnate Rafe Sterling and his fiancée, Hope Malloy, were announced.

Kaylee tried to tear her gaze away from the monitor so she could chat with the new arrivals, but what appeared next riveted her attention.

Two of Mistress Aviana's slaves made their way down the staircase wearing tight black pants and leather harnesses, and volunteers quickly attached the pair to the front of the sleigh, which made sense. Naturally the owner would ride in that.

The crier blasted his trumpet again.

Around Kaylee, conversation halted as their attention was drawn to the screen, and a camera zoomed in on Mistress Aviana who spread her arms wide.

She was breathtaking in a one-piece silver outfit that might have been painted on. Either that or the fabric was sleek, unlike anything Kaylee had ever seen.

The owner's high-heeled silver lamé boots reached mid thigh. She'd accented the look with a glacial-blue cape bearing a rigid collar that framed her face. The garment's train was so long that parts of it were draped on the stairs behind her.

That alone would have been amazing, but she'd taken her outfit a step further, and tonight her white hair flirted with her

ankles. On her head rested a crown fashioned with spears topped with glowing snowflakes.

The camera zoomed in on her wide, violet eyes that were fringed with long, frosted lashes. With a precise back-and-forth motion, she waved like the royalty she was.

The attendees responded with wild applause, along with loud whoops and hollers of approval.

Two elves hurried to offer their assistance as she began a slow descent into the dungeon.

Behind Kaylee, Tore cleared his throat.

Once he'd snagged everyone's attention, Trinity glanced around before speaking. "Is everyone ready? As soon as Milady joins us, the parade will begin. We'll proceed in the same order that we came down the stairs."

Excitement buzzing in the air, court members lined up, and volunteers offered them piles of beads.

"Master Evan and Kaylee, you'll bring up the rear, behind Milady's sleigh. On the back, you'll find a box filled with candy canes, along with a bag for you to carry over your shoulder, Sir."

House lights slowly came up, and the pounding Christmas music thudded through the space once more, forcing Trinity to shout to be heard. "We'll make three rounds. Then there will be a receiving line. Hannah, you're welcome to be seated at any point."

"Thank you. So far, I'm doing fine."

Her husband—and Dominant—had her arm tucked securely inside his elbow. "I'll take good care of her."

Kaylee adored seeing the love he displayed for his wife. No man had ever looked at her that way.

Suddenly she had a pang of longing for something she had never experienced. How was that possible?

The moment Mistress Aviana appeared, Trinity made her way to the front of the line. With a contagious smile and massive wave, she danced her way into the dungeon.

Perhaps thirty seconds later, arms folded across his Viking-size chest, facial features set in a decidedly nonfictive frown, Tore followed.

As assistants helped Aviana onto a bench on the sleigh, then covered her with a shimmering blanket, the rest of the court disappeared from view.

Then Aviana flicked a small whip across both of her slaves' shoulders, and the sleigh moved forward.

How this pageantry had been executed in under ninety seconds, Kaylee had no idea.

Evan grabbed the white sack—much smaller than the one with all the gifts in it—and Kaylee picked up a handful of treats to give away.

The noise and enthusiasm inside the dungeon stunned and thrilled her. The energy rivaled any Mardi Gras parade she'd been to.

As he walked, Frost received a few catcalls and whistles of approval. And he continually called out a cheery, "Ho, ho, ho."

Not for the first time, she wondered who this man was.

Even though she had to trail behind him, she decided not to let him ruin her evening. Though she was his assistant for

the night, she absolutely, positively did not have to stare at his tight butt or look at his muscular body.

With determination, she focused on the crowd, waving and wishing revelers a merry Christmas.

When she spotted Maddie, Kaylee made a point to walk closer to her to give her a candy cane.

Because beads were being tossed and the attendees crowded the walkways, the three circuits took much longer than she expected.

When they arrived at the back of the room, the screens from earlier had been removed. After court members were seated, spotlights were trained on Mistress Aviana as her elves helped her from her perch, then up onto her throne.

After the sleigh was placed near the tree in Santa's area, the slaves were detached from their harnesses, and they made their way to their mistress's side where they knelt, flanking her.

Once Frost was ensconced in his high-back chair with Kaylee standing nearby, the trumpeter heralded another announcement.

“Welcome to the Quarter's Holiday Extravaganza! On Milady's command, the tree will be lit, and Santa will start reaching into his bag with presents for the naughtiest of attendees.” He paused for dramatic effect. “You know who you are.”

More raucous cheers rocked the air.

“Our Lady *invites* everyone to parade past the reviewing stand.”

The emphasis on the word meant it was a royal decree and not a suggestion.

Aviana's slaves offered their assistance as she stood. "Join me in counting down from ten." Her melodic voice boomed through the club. "Ten! Nine!"

The lower the numbers dropped, the louder the attendees became.

"One!" At that moment, blinding colors burst from the tree. Then red and green lights hit it, causing the ornaments and tinsel to radiate in dazzling glory.

Again, the music cranked up, and Mistress Aviana smiled beatifically as she lowered herself back onto her throne.

Fulfilling their duty, Milady's adoring subjects fell into a long, winding line.

"Are you ready for this?" Frost asked.

"I am." Because it meant Kaylee was drawing closer to the end of the time she was forced to spend with him. Even though she appreciated the chance to participate in the event, she'd like it a whole lot more if she had been following Master Denton or anyone else for that matter.

Once the first person arrived to see Santa, time passed in a blur. Not surprising her, half-naked women squirmed around on Frost's lap, insisting they'd been naughty, not nice. More than one asked for a spanking.

While he was entertaining yet another barely dressed woman, Abigail popped over.

"How's it going?"

Kaylee scowled in Mr. Ho-ho-ho's direction. "He's terrible at work. But dealing with him being half-naked and watching

people fawn over him, feeding his ego?” Exaggeratedly she rolled her eyes. “I keep focusing on the fact I get a week of vacation out of putting up with him.”

Abigail offered a hug of support. With a shake of her head, she skipped the opportunity to collect a gift and instead walked toward the exit.

Kaylee continued to make small talk with attendees waiting for their chance to visit Santa.

When she noticed Maddie standing in line next to Master Zander, Kaylee almost dropped the candy cane she was holding. Why on earth was her sweet friend with the original grinch? The night had become some kind of carnival funhouse.

When it was Maddie’s turn, they hugged.

“Be sure to call me tomorrow.” Maddie took Kaylee’s hands.

Since she was dying to know what was up with Maddie and Master Zander, she definitely would.

“I’ll be at the shelter for some of the day, but I want to hear from you.”

Kaylee glanced over her shoulder at Evan before nodding her agreement.

Most Dominants had stepped aside while their submissives chatted with Santa, but Zander possessively stayed close to Maddie. Maybe he didn’t like Frost very much either. Perhaps the grinch was smarter than Kaylee thought.

“Ho, ho, ho!” Frost greeted Maddie. “Have you been a good girl?”

“Always!” Maddie made a small circle over her head, indicating a halo.

Kaylee laughed. Her friend definitely had a naughty side, no matter what she wanted people to believe.

As if proving it, she licked her candy cane in a very suggestive way.

Frost gave her a present, and then she smiled and rejoined Zander while Kaylee beckoned the next person over.

With each passing minute, the club became more animated as scenes resumed. Everyone had paid homage to Mistress Aviana, and there were only a couple of stragglers waiting to see Santa.

After Aviana was assisted from the dais, she thanked the members of her court. Destiny hurried from the dungeon, and Tore—with his shoulders pulled back—strode down an aisle, surveying the scenes.

Volunteers set to work, removing chairs and moving the platform against a wall. Funny how many times she’d been at the club without noticing all the planning and details that went into making everything run smoothly.

When the last person left Frost’s presence, she exhaled. Finally she was free of him. Good riddance for the rest of the weekend.

Before Kaylee could escape, Mistress Aviana all but floated over, her slaves trailing behind.

“You both did a wonderful job. Thank you.”

Frost stood. “My pleasure, Milady.”

Kaylee dropped a small curtsy.

The owner moved on, leaving Kaylee alone with her Santa boss, and the air became supercharged. Suddenly nervous, she tucked her hands behind her back so she didn't betray herself by wringing them together. "Good night, Mr. Frost."

"Not so fast."

Just like at work. With him, it was always one more thing.

"There's something for you in my sack."

"Donate it," she suggested. Unlike his dozens of oohing and aahing fans, there wasn't a chance on earth she was going to sit on his lap and confess to being a bad girl.

Ignoring her flippant reply, he bent to retrieve the present.

Her mouth fell open at the sight of her own gift in his massive, capable hands. "This can't be."

"It is."

"But..."

"I was watching when you went to the coat check."

With a fierce scowl, she looked at him. "Do you spy on me at work in the same way?"

He didn't alter his expression. "I guessed you brought something you would have liked to receive."

When she took the handcuffs from his grip, she said nothing. Too bad she didn't have Master Denton to use them on her.

"Perhaps you'd like to play with your toy this evening?"

As she tried to comprehend his meaning, she blinked several times in quick succession. "With..." She paused. "With you?"

“Why not? Other than the fact you think I’m an asshole.”

“That’s reason enough.”

“Since we’re about to be married, it makes sense to spend some time together.”

The man and his outrageous proclamations made her head spin. “A fake relationship,” she reminded him.

As if she hadn’t spoken, he went on. “We need to be convincing. And I know next to nothing about you.”

“Whose fault is that?”

Suddenly he took hold of her shoulders and drew her to the side, causing unwelcome ribbons of awareness to unspool inside her.

“Careful,” he cautioned an attendee.

“Sorry, Frost.”

Because a couple hadn’t been paying attention, they’d almost plowed into her and would have if he hadn’t reacted so swiftly.

With a tight nod, he acknowledged the Top’s apology.

Maybe she should thank him, but the words stuck in her throat.

After Frost removed his hands from her, he met her gaze again. “Where were we?”

Since she was reeling from his touch, she had to force herself to remember.

“Ah yes. You were saying it’s my fault we don’t know each other.”

Accepting his lifeline, she picked up the thread of the conversation. “My previous boss, Sylvia, and I knew a lot about each other.”

“And that led to a successful business...how?”

Incredulous, she gasped. “Are you suggesting that the board fired her because she was courteous?”

“Personal should never come before business.”

Was that motto engraved on his heart or in his head? Maybe both? “Have you always been this way?” Or had life hardened him?

With an intensity she’d never seen from him before, he studied her. “Which way?”

She clamped her lips together. After all, she needed her job. “I’ve said too much.”

A hint of a smile teased his eyes, if not his mouth. “Since when has that stopped you? Have I always been what way?”

“Ruthless.”

A shadow passed over his face. “No.”

So life *had* made him that way. Damn, she hated the fact he suddenly seemed a little more human.

“At Christoff, I’ve been attempting something that might be impossible...to save the firm from failure. That requires difficult decisions.”

“So you’re willing to sacrifice the many for the few? In college philosophy class, I’d heard it the other way around.”

A small tic—of threat?—pulsed in his temple. “You would have preferred that I’d come in and shut down the company? Fire everyone and bring in my own people?” He paused.

“Including an admin assistant who is committed to me and my mission?”

Heeding his barb about disloyalty, she swallowed her instinctive retort.

“I realize that support would be a lot to expect from you.” He leaned in slightly. “So I haven’t asked.”

Maybe she shouldn’t have these kinds of discussions with him. Losing Sylvia as her boss had been devastating. That night, Kaylee had gone home and cried. And she didn’t want to lower her guard around Frost.

“Rest assured, once the ship is righted, a new CEO will be installed. And you’ll be rid of me.”

“Really?” This was the first good news she’d had in months. “How long will that take?”

“You’ll hold the door open for me when I leave?”

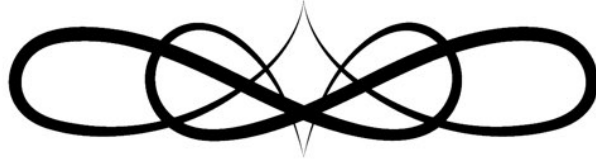
Absolutely. With a sunny smile, she responded, “I’ll count down the days on my calendar.”

“Perhaps in that case, you’ll want to work to ensure my success.”

The promise of that reward would be enough to motivate her for a long while.

“Now, Ms. Robbins, about getting to know each other better. I have a few suggestions. Would you like to hear some?”

CHAPTER THREE



A chill ran up her back as she recalled the feel of Frost's hands on her.

“My grandmother will be curious about you, about us. It would be odd if I didn't know your birthday or favorite foods.”

Panic held her in its icy grip. “Maybe there's an online questionnaire we can fill out. I'll look.”

“That's surface. I'm talking about more important issues, where we live and what things we have in common.” In his usual no-nonsense way, he dismissed her suggestion. “Knowing someone *intimately* takes time and effort.”

At his emphasis on the word, her mouth dried.

“Gran is astute. She'll want to know how and where I proposed. What makes you special? Why are you willing to put up with me? What our plans are for the future. And for continuing the family line.”

Kaylee blinked rapidly.

“How many children do you want?”

Since her breakup with Dwayne, she'd shelved that dream. Frost's casual reminder of what she'd lost stung, and she self-protectively wrapped her arms around herself.

“Four for me. But I’d be open to compromise if my wife wanted more.”

More?

The thought of having Frost’s baby darted into her mind, lingering for a moment before she could banish it. *What the hell is wrong with me?* She didn’t even like him, and she was doing her best to get away from him.

“We need shared experiences to reminisce about.”

“During our Monday morning planning meeting, we can come up with a few stories. I’ll add a line item to our agenda.”

He shook his head. “That will lack details and the nuance we need. Gran will figure that out.”

Much as Kaylee hated to admit it—even to herself—he had a point.

“Since the dinner is only a few days away, we need to make the most of what little time we have. Let’s scene tonight and then spend tomorrow together.”

Once again, the confounding bosshole had outmaneuvered her. She should have asked for more than seventy hours of pay. Right now, it didn’t seem like nearly enough.

“Tell me what you were hoping to do tonight.”

“Nothing.” At the fib, her face heated.

“Is that right? You came to the Quarter, dressed like this...” Slowly, excruciatingly, he swept his gaze over her, from the shoes with their ridiculous upturned toes, to her bare legs, torso, then her face.

Approval radiated from his gaze, flooding her with awareness.

“And since you were given a fairly prominent role in tonight’s festivities, it’s certainly not your first visit to the club.”

How she hadn’t run into him before, she had no idea.

“You brought a gift.” He glanced at the small package she held. “Handcuffs? So I’m guessing you like restraints.” Frost didn’t wait for an answer. “And I happen to enjoy tying down beautiful submissives.”

Her knees wobbled as all thoughts of playing with Master Denton were shoved to the side. A wicked image of herself, bent over Frost’s desk, assailed her. She’d be gripping the far side, the cuffs securing her wrists together as he raised her skirt to give her the kind of spanking she craved.

Considering her, he tipped his head to the side. “You were planning to scene.”

His words were more a statement than a question, and they provided her with the perfect opportunity to escape him. All she had to do was say no and walk away. What was wrong with her that she was still in the same spot?

“It’s been a while since I played, and I’ve missed it.”

His admission, one of the first insights she’d had into his life, shook a little, making him seem even more human than he had earlier. But she responded in the most obvious way. “It’s because we work too much.”

“Agree. And as such, we both need the release.” He leaned in a little closer, until he filled her vision and the scent of him wrapped around her.

“You know about safe words.”

His voice was graveled, unbelievably sexy, sending tingles down her spine. Slowly she nodded.

“You can trust me.”

Can I? This was about much more than physical safety, which the club took seriously. If he crossed any lines, Tore and Aviana would have him outside on the curb in an instant.

For Kaylee, this was as much mental as it was emotional. If she took this step with him, there'd be no going back. Baring her bottom to her boss and allowing him to dominate her promised to be the worst decision she'd ever made, yet temptation beckoned.

“Back to my earlier question. What were you hoping to do this evening?”

The knife-edge between sanity and risk was thin, and she teetered on it.

“Ms. Robbins?”

Kaylee gave herself a mental shake. She couldn't seriously be contemplating asking her fake fiancé to spank her. Still, she couldn't help but answer. “I'm not into a lot of pain.”

“So it's about the sensuality?”

On his tongue, the word was as husky as it was beautiful.

“You like to explore the mental aspects of a scene? Surrender and reward? Dominance and submission?”

All of that. Her heart leaped. Even though she'd played with several Tops, she'd never been able to articulate what she wanted that clearly. How was he so able to read her?

“Am I close?”

Trembling, she admitted the truth to both of them. “Yes.”

“I’d like to give you that. If you’re willing.”

With patience she hadn’t seen from him before, he waited for her answer. Her entire body hummed, as much from the way he regarded her as from the way his suggestion wrapped her in anticipation. “In that case...” *Am I really going to do this?* A burst of adrenaline surged through her, making her tremble. Then, for courage, she drew a breath. “Yes.”

“I’m delighted.” He smiled. “Now tell me your safe word?”

Though her pulse raced, negotiation provided familiar ground that helped soothe her nerves. “Red.”

“And for slow?”

“Yellow.”

“Where would you like to play? *Rue Sensuelle*? The dungeon? A private room?”

Definitely not the last. And the club itself was rather exposed. Kinky Avenue, as *Rue Sensuelle* was called by longtime members of the Quarter, provided specialized theme rooms, and it was separate from the dungeon, keeping them away from prying eyes. “Could we walk around a bit while I decide?”

“Of course.”

At work, he was never this accommodating. Interesting that he was more considerate as a Dominant than he ever was as her employer.

“I’ll change and grab my bag.”

So she wasn’t going to be spanked by Santa?

“Where would you like to meet?”

“Near the vendors?” At least it was quieter there, and maybe she’d have an opportunity to chat with Abigail and perhaps reconsider her decision.

He offered a tight nod. “Give me five minutes.” But before walking away, he leaned in a little closer. “You’re not planning to run?”

Kaylee refused to admit the thought had flashed through her mind. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

The brilliant smile he shot her flipped her tummy. Thank God he didn’t do that at the office.

As he strode away, masculinity somehow enhanced by his boots and festive pants, she watched, still unable to believe what she’d agreed to.

After he was gone, she forced out a small breath.

Now that the parade was over, the vendor fair had reopened. To distract herself, Kaylee headed over there to browse all the amazing merchandise.

Since Abigail was busy with customers, Kaylee looked at a wooden paddle. Then an image of it in Frost’s strong grip teased her, and she immediately moved on to a booth offering beautiful works of handcrafted stained glass.

She was tempted to buy one depicting a woman in rope bondage, but before she could make the decision on whether to splurge on the expensive piece, she caught sight of Frost.

With a bag in hand and his intense gaze locked on her, he strode over to join her.

Unable to help herself, she stared at him—entranced by how delicious he was.

Just like earlier, he was dressed in a white shirt, with slacks he might have been poured into. But now, she knew exactly how broad his shoulders were, what his chiseled abs looked like, and she'd watched his biceps flex as he moved his arms.

“See something you like?” A slow smile flirted with his lips, transforming his features.

He'd caught her staring.

“I...” Where were her words?

“The offerings.” With his finger, he indicated the piece of art she'd been appreciating.

“Oh.” She tried for a light, airy tone. “It's out of my price range.”

He raised an eyebrow. In skepticism? After all, he knew how much she earned. But still, he had no idea where her money went.

“Shall we?”

Heart once again beating a frantic tattoo, and very much aware of the weight of the present in her grip, she fell in step next to him.

They took a trip through the entire dungeon before wending their way to Kinky Avenue.

Most of the play spaces were occupied, but the far one—a sparse, interrogation-type room—was open.

Pausing, she looked at him.

“It's your call entirely, Ms. Robbins. I want you to be comfortable.”

Since the space was designed for the maximum *discomfort*, his statement was ludicrous. The area contained two wooden chairs, a desk, an overhead hook, a bright lamp, and a display of wicked-looking spanking implements—none of which she would ever be interested in trying. “It’s intimidating.” As well as overwhelming. Yet it was semiprivate enough that hopefully her friends wouldn’t see her with Frost.

He said nothing, neither encouraging her nor making other suggestions. A moment ago, he’d said it was up to her, and he obviously meant it, which helped her begin to accept him as a Top. “I’m fine with it.”

Once her decision was made, he entered the small space, and she followed, standing to one side while he placed his bag on the desk. The resulting thud seemed to echo off the walls, though that had to be impossible over the thumping percussion of the club’s Christmas music.

They were often in close quarters at work, but there was a professional barrier between them.

Protectively she wrapped her arms around herself as Frost unbuttoned one of his cuffs. He began to roll it back but then stopped and looked at her. “On second thought, I’d prefer you to do this for me.”

Unmoving, she blinked.

“Is that a problem, sub?”

The word rolled off his tongue naturally with a sensual lilt. But it cascaded conflicting emotions through her. At the club, she’d played with plenty of Tops, but none of them had asked her to do anything like this.

Was this different because they had a preexisting relationship? Or was it because he was asking her to do something that seemed so personal?

“Come here, Ms. Robbins.”

She had a safe word, but a traitorous part of her didn’t want to use it.

“We need to be comfortable with each other in order to convince my grandmother we’re in love.”

Love? Where had that ridiculous suggestion come from?

Another small smile flirted with his lips. This version of him was oh-so-tempting.

“You can’t stay ten feet away from me at Gran’s.”

Telling herself he was making sense, she closed the distance between them, almost tripping over the upturned toes of her silly elf shoes.

When they stood inches apart, with him towering over her, her pulse galloped.

He offered his arm for her to roll back the sleeve.

After placing her unopened Christmas present on the desk, she avoided making eye contact with him, and instead focused on her task. But the instant her fingers glanced off his skin, electricity sizzled through her.

Surprised, she looked up. Had he experienced that too?

For a moment, neither of them breathed.

Then he spoke. “Keep going.” His tone was clipped and gruffer than even a minute before.

As quickly as possible, she did as he’d requested—ordered?—then stepped back.

“Now unpack my bag.”

“Why?” She blinked.

“I want every part of you to be engaged in this scene.”

Then, instead of saying anything further, he waited for her to do as he said.

The man next to her was no longer the jovial Santa he'd pretended to be. In his place was a badass, alpha Dominant.

Frost's words and actions melded together, triggering a deep longing inside her. She wanted to escape her life, yearned to submit, if only for an hour.

Her fingers trembled as she unzipped the duffel with its unusual logo on the side—some sort of owl, maybe?

As she stared at the contents, her eyes widened. Were his toys a reflection of his preferences?

“Now place the contents on the desk.”

Her hands shook as she followed his order.

In her normal, precise manner, she laid out a small red suede flogger with thick strands, a tawse, a single-tail whip that scared the daylights out of her, and then a pink leather paddle with raised letters spelling out PRINCESS.

Not wanting to play with a toy that belonged to someone else, she looked at him. “I'm curious about this.”

“I bought it at a recent vendor fair. It's unused.”

Reassured, she released a small breath.

“It's how I feel about any bottom I engage with.”

His statement brought up a million questions for her. What kind of relationships had Frost had? Did D/s extend into his

personal life? And had he ever collared a sub?

Even though she told herself it was none of her business and that the answers didn't matter—after all, she and Frost meant nothing to each other—she couldn't chase away the demanding thoughts.

After blinking to clear her mind, she returned to his duffel and pulled out a long, leather-wrapped cylinder with a tongue-like piece of rigid leather at the end. "I've never seen one of these."

"It's a dragon's tail. Capable of being placed in very precise areas."

She didn't even want to imagine.

"Such as your nipples and clit."

"I didn't ask."

As he chuckled, she scowled at him, then back at the awful, wicked-looking toy. "This one is a hell no." For a moment, the word *Sir* hovered on the edge of her tongue, but she refused to speak it aloud.

"Anytime you would like to test my hypothesis, I'm available."

"Maybe when the cow jumps over the moon."

He raised an eyebrow. "You might be surprised."

"Maybe." But she wasn't likely to find out since she had no intention of taking him up on the offer tonight, and this was the one and only time they would be together.

"Continue when you're ready."

She shuddered as she pulled out a pair of nipple clamps. Then she followed it with electrical tape. Next was a blindfold.

At the very bottom lay a pair of metal handcuffs and a teardrop-shaped plug.

When the bag was empty, she surveyed the desktop. Most of his toys excited her in a way she hadn't anticipated.

With an exhalation, she looked at him. He was focused on her, intently studying her every reaction.

"Now unwrap your present."

After she did so, she looked to him for further guidance.

"Lady's choice."

"Meaning?"

"Select whatever you'd like to use. Feel free to put everything else back."

No one had ever approached a scene this way before, giving her a tremendous amount of control but within well-defined parameters.

Hastily she returned the clamps.

He grinned. "Are they too much for you?"

"For tonight." It was so much more than that. The idea of him toying with her nipples, teasing them, elongating them, then adjusting the tension seemed far too intimate.

She also put back the plug.

"Objections to that?"

"In general, no. I've used them before and am comfortable with anal play, as long as the timing is right." Once she'd laid out the toys she wanted to play with—her handcuffs, the flogger, and the paddle—she stepped aside while he moved in to have a look.

“Excellent choices.”

Would he have been this approving no matter what she'd decided on?

“Why these?”

Of course he'd ask that. “My handcuffs because they won't chafe my skin.”

He nodded.

“And the paddle because of its thuddy, dull impact. And the flogger is just beautiful with its thick strands.”

“You'd like to use them all?”

She pursed her lips. Wasn't that why he'd asked? Or was it just another of his diabolical tactics? “Yes.”

“We'll begin with a hand spanking.”

How long had it been since she'd experienced one of those? “Yes.”

“And would you like to have an orgasm?”

His question threatened to strangle her, leaving her breathless.

“I...” Typically that wasn't something she expected from a Top.

“Would you enjoy that?”

She didn't need to answer at all, let alone honestly. Yet he looked at her so intently that she was compelled to respond. “I haven't been to the club for a long time.” And when she got home from work at the end of the day, she was often too tired to take matters into her own hands.

“It’s up to you. But I’d like to know if you’re against it because I will never take advantage of you being in an altered state of mind.”

The suggestion sent her thoughts into a tailspin.

“To be clear, I’d be taking care of your needs, and I’d expect nothing in return.” His icy eyes had darkened to flint, and heat simmered there. “Are you against it?”

“No.” Desperate to sever his hold on her, she turned her head and glanced at the side wall.

Very gently, he placed a finger beneath her chin and guided her to meet his gaze. “It will always be your choice. You’d have to ask for it.”

That was so unlikely that it seemed impossible.

“Would you like to remove your dress?”

She was tempted to leave it on, but working around the costume would be ridiculous. “Makes sense.”

Her boss plucked the hat with its massive white bobble from her head and placed it on the table while she bent to remove the elf shoes.

Instead of just watching her, he tucked them beneath the chair before folding his arms across his impossibly wide chest.

At work she was so focused on her dislike of him that she never noticed how devastating he was. That thought was quickly replaced by another. Thank God she hadn’t paid attention. Working with him would have proven doubly difficult.

Now, squeezing her eyes shut, she reached for the hem of her skirt and drew it over her head.

When she managed to gather the courage to look at him, he was in exactly the same spot, taking her in.

As he extended his hand to accept the garment, her heart skipped over its next beat.

Carefully he draped the outfit over the back of a chair.

She struggled to resist the temptation to cover herself. Instead, she stood there in her shelf bra and tight-fitting boy shorts. *Lord help me.* Was this really happening?

And even worse, she didn't want to stop it.

“Why, Ms. Robbins. You've been hiding all this from me?”

It never occurred to her that he would like her soft curves, but there was no doubting the approval in his gaze.

As her cheeks heated, he lowered the hook from the ceiling and cast a glance at her, as if judging her height.

“Come to me, tempting sub.”

His soft endearment melted her.

He crooked a finger to beckon her. “And bring the cuffs with you.”

In this moment, she could deny him nothing.

With extreme competence, he secured her wrists, being certain she couldn't wiggle out of the restraints, but also checked that the fit wasn't too tight.

Then he looped the leather over the metal and positioned her so that her arms were stretched over her head, but not so high that she had to lift onto her tiptoes.

“To ensure we're in compliance with club rules, I am going to place electrical tape over your nipples.”

She should have thought of that. Now it was too late.

Frost took a pair of safety scissors from a side pocket in his bag and cut tape into four strips.

The confounded man cupped her right breast, and her traitorous nipple hardened into a tight bud even without being touched. “You *are* sensitive.”

“I mentioned that.” Though her response was noncommittal, he’d no doubt ascertained the truth. His touch turned her on.

He covered the nub with two strips of the black tape in the shape of an X.

Gently he brushed his knuckles up her neck before repeating the process on the other side. She couldn’t believe how erotic this was.

If he were a lover, she might be willing to explore a little. But from him, the one man she shouldn’t crave but was now desperate for...?

When he was done and her nipples no longer throbbed, she sighed in relief.

“Now I’m going to warm you up.”

Part of her wanted him to just get on with it. But months of working side by side with him had taught her he did things at his own rate.

Slowly he moved his hands over her buttocks and upper thighs, setting nerve endings on fire.

Then, every movement deliberate, he spanked her rear, starting gently then increasing the pressure until it was just short of painful.

Lost, Kaylee moaned. Then he moved in closer, pressing his body against her heated, bare skin.

“I want to engage every part of you, chase away all your thoughts until the only thing you’re left with is pleasure.”

She’d never been with anyone like him.

“Is that what you’re looking for, sub?”

“Yes.” The word was part whisper, part plea.

“Then tell me.”

“Spank me. Make me forget everything else.”

Frost pressed his lips to the side of her neck. “I’m going to flog you—all of you.”

“Do it.” She’d never been so greedy.

When she scened, she often watched what her Top was doing, but tonight she closed her eyes, offering trust, intending to savor the moment.

Frost danced the suede strands over her shoulders and upper arms before allowing the falls to tease her back. Then the ends tickled her breasts and ribcage.

Even above the music, his steps seemed to echo off the floor as he circled her, flicking his wrist and allowing the strips to caress her skin.

By slow measures, he increased his intensity, moving back and forth across her entire body, wrapping her waist then hips with the leather.

Her body hummed with awareness. It was enough and not nearly enough at the same time. “More...”

“You’re sure?”

“Green.”

As if reassured, he gave her what she wanted, landing strokes in a pulsing thump, keeping time with the blasting techno music.

She was getting more and more aroused every moment, and her body jerked in response to his flogging.

He was fierce, and the handcuffs took more and more of her weight as her knees weakened. Hungry, demanding need clawed at her. “Sir...”

“Tell me what you want.”

“Get me off?”

“You want me to make you come?”

“Yes.”

Without making her beg, he slid a hand between her legs and stroked her through her panties.

In frustration, she balled her hands. That touch would never be enough. “I can’t...”

“Tell me exactly what you want.”

“That’s not enough.”

Coming in closer, he tucked a finger inside the gusset of her panties.

Shamelessly she jerked her hips.

“Are you horny, my tempting sub?”

“Yes!” If he demanded she admit it, she would. At this point, a climax clawed at her in incessant demand, pushing her past caring what he thought of her reactions. “Finger my clit, Sir.”

“Anything for you, Ms. Robbins.”

Though he pressed against the throbbing bundle of nerves, it still wasn't enough for her. “I need you inside me.”

The confounding man took his time, playing with her, ensuring she was ready before slipping two fingers inside her and fucking her with them.

Lost beneath his masterful touch, she lifted onto her tiptoes, offering him deeper access. “Harder, Sir. Faster. *Please.*”

As he met her demands, ripples of pleasure pulsed through her.

When he found her G-spot and pressed against it, the world around her shattered with a low, desperate cry.

“You are so perfect in so many ways.”

Long moments later, after he'd eased his fingers from inside her and smoothed her panties back into place, she blinked several times to focus her gaze.

He was in front of her still, and he sucked his fingers into his mouth. “You're every bit as delicious as I hoped.”

Even though he'd stopped what he was doing, her body continued to hum.

“Now the paddle.”

“You're not finished?” Her voice wobbled.

He was studying her, but his grin was wolfish with triumph. “Unless you'd like to stop? In which case, use your safe word.”

“No.” She shook her head. At any other time, she might. The orgasm had satiated her, and she wondered if she'd even

enjoy it if they continued. Yet she wanted to see. “Green.”

He moved to stand behind her. Then once again, he caressed her buttocks before blazing the leather beneath them. Searing her skin with the raised letters?

“Nine more.”

Was that all?

But the way he delivered each, with the full force of his powerfully muscular arm, ten was more than enough.

If he had continued, she might have needed her slow word, but he’d read her perfectly and knew exactly how much she could take.

“Now...” The same way he’d begun, Frost finished her off, with a hand spanking, then by rubbing her skin hard, then with increasingly soft and sensual strokes.

Kaylee was lost. She’d never been with a Top as skilled as he was.

By the time he was finished, her body was limp and dotted with perspiration.

“Let’s get you down from there.”

She was hardly aware of what he was doing, but moments later, she was detached from the hook and uncuffed. Then he gently rubbed her shoulders and upper arms before scooping her from the floor and carrying her to the chair.

“This isn’t necessary.”

“We disagree on that.”

Kaylee had never been the kind of bottom who wanted aftercare. Instead she preferred to bask in endorphins and pleasure on her own terms. But since he’d given her a

delicious climax, she was a little weak. Why else would she be content to curl against him?

By slow measures, reality returned, and she pressed her palm to Frost's strong chest, easing herself back from his body. "Thank you." Those words weren't just polite; they were heartfelt. She'd needed this more than she'd known, but that he'd been the man—the Top—to give it to her made her reel.

"My pleasure, Ms. Robbins."

He helped her to stand and grasped her shoulders in his firm grip until she found her balance.

"Are you okay?"

"Maybe a little woozy still."

He grinned as if she had given him the biggest compliment ever. "I'll remove the electrical tape."

"That's not necessary. I can—"

"It wasn't a request."

His tone, combined with the throbbing in his temple, she recognized. If she had the energy, she'd argue with him. But since he'd left her ragged, she clamped her mouth shut.

After standing, he exerted the right amount of pressure to pull off the black strips without damaging her skin. Her nipples were swollen, reaching demandingly toward him.

For a moment, it appeared he might brush them with his thumbnails, but instead, he turned to pick up her costume.

While she slipped into her dress and shoes, he packed his bag, then grabbed sanitizing wipes from another side pocket. How many more secrets did the duffel hold?

After cleaning up the space, he offered her the handcuffs and elf hat. “I’ll drive you home.”

“That’s not—”

“Necessary,” he cut in. “Nevertheless we scened. It’s late. You can waste your breath, but I won’t back down. Or you can yield to the inevitable, and we can be on our way. What will it be? Getting home quickly or arguing with me?”

This was the implacable man she knew so well.

In under five minutes, she’d reclaimed her bag, changed shoes, and he was maneuvering her toward the exit. Once again, he was in total control.

At the reception desk, Destiny stopped them to offer her thanks. “You were both amazing. I’ve heard rave reviews about Santa and his elf.” She studied them both. “Seems like you make a great team.”

Did they?

“It was my pleasure.” Though Frost had responded to Destiny, he’d kept his gaze trained on Kaylee.

Being the object of his total attention gave her an illicit thrill.

After taking a breath, she responded to Destiny. “I had fun. Please thank Milady for thinking of me.”

“Now that you did so well, I’m sure she’ll be asking you to do it again next year.”

The idea plummeted her thoughts into freefall.

Where would she be a year from now? And how would she deal with Frost after they’d shared this experience.

“Shall we?”

His question dragged her back to reality.

Placing his hand possessively on her back, he guided her toward the stairs.

Outside, an oversize SUV with beautiful sleek lines waited at the curb. The back door stood open, and a chauffeur—complete with a black cap—waited.

Frost led her straight toward the vehicle.

Of course he had a private driver. Though the realization didn't surprise her, it was a jolting reminder of the differences between their backgrounds. He was wealthy beyond belief while she struggled to pay her bills.

She couldn't allow herself to forget, even for a moment, that what was happening was nothing more than make believe.

Once she was sealed inside the vehicle with its butter-soft leather seats, he slid in beside her and uncapped a chilled bottle of water that was waiting in a cup holder. "Drink some of this."

Every day at work, she spent her hours catering to his whims. And yet this evening, he'd met her every desire.

He was complex enough to be unfathomable.

Still, because it gave her something to do with her hands, she accepted the bottle.

The drive to her small apartment on the outskirts of the city took much less time than it did during the week. But instead of dropping her at the entrance to her complex, Frost instructed the driver to park in a loading zone—not that it mattered at this time of the night.

The driver jogged around to open the door. "Thank you," she told the man. "I didn't catch your name."

“Jennings, ma’am.”

“Well, thank you, Mr. Jennings. I appreciate the ride.”

“A pleasure, ma’am.” He doffed his hat.

Frost grabbed her bag and walked her up the stairs and to her door.

“Thank you for an enjoyable evening, Ms. Robbins.”

“Thank you...” At the club, calling him Sir had been natural, but now it would be odd.

“Are you an early riser?”

“Not on Sundays.” The only day she didn’t have to show up at work.

“In that case, I will pick you up at ten.”

Pick me up? She scowled. “For what?”

“So we can go ring shopping.”

His words stunned her into silence. How far was he planning to take this charade?

“Then we’ll have lunch and...get to know one another better.” He leaned toward her. Close, then closer still, and her brain short circuited.

Was he going to kiss her? Would she let him if he did?

But instead he tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

Her hand shook uncontrollably as she inserted her key into the lock.

“Sleep well, Ms. Robbins.”

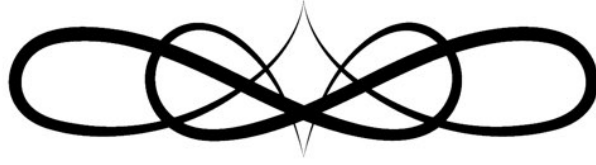
With everything they’d shared, he’d ensured that she would do anything but that.

Once she was inside with a sealed door between them, she collapsed her shoulders against the wood, trying to drag in a deep breath.

What had just happened between them had rocked her world. And now she was left with a single question.

How would she possibly survive Evan Frost and his unceasing, escalating demands?

CHAPTER FOUR



“**B**usiness and pleasure don’t mix, Frost. You know it.”

Across the numerous speakers hanging from the ceiling in his home gym, the judgmental tone of Mistress Aviana’s voice annoyed the hell out of him—probably because he’d had the same thought a hundred or maybe a thousand times.

Knowing what he was in for with the persistent Domme, he hit the STOP button on the treadmill and snatched up the small towel draped over the display.

“What the hell were you thinking last night?”

That presumed he’d been thinking at all.

When he’d run into Kaylee outside the fourteenth-floor fitness center and clamped his hands on her soft, feminine shoulders, the sight of her had stunned him. His prim and proper secretary had transformed into an ethereal, tempting elf.

The hem of her dress had been impossibly short and generously cut so it swished around her thighs as she moved. The top part conformed to her body, and the fit was perfect.

He had not been one hundred percent certain she was headed to the Quarter, but he’d had his suspicions, especially when she refused his offer to give her a ride. From the updates

he'd received from Destiny once she convinced him to fill in for Master Denton, Frost knew most of the volunteers for the evening were going to be dressed as elves.

Then, as he'd drawn her aside and held onto her shoulders, he'd had a primal reaction.

For a fraction of a second, her breath had caught, and her soft hazel eyes had opened wide as she stared up at him.

Right then, he hadn't viewed her as the woman who fought him tooth and nail every day and made his life difficult. Instead she'd seemed like the answer to the complex problems he'd been turning over in his personal life—namely what to do about his beloved, if persistent, grandmother.

Maybe they could be collaborators. He knew how much she wanted time off. And if he wasn't such a dick, he would have signed her request form immediately. But the truth was, he counted on her more than he thought possible. She knew the employees, and she understood the company in a way he didn't yet.

Kaylee Robbins was an invaluable asset. Selfishly he hated to be without her even for a few days.

“You're a total bastard.” Aviana's stern voice dragged him back to the present.

Why the hell had he even answered her call? Maybe because he knew she would have dialed him every ten minutes if he didn't. After that, she would have shown up at his loft, banging on the door until he opened it. Then she'd breeze past him wearing some outrageous outfit that didn't match her serene smile, make herself at home, and insist he uncork his finest champagne. Then after one glass, and giving him a piece of her mind, she'd pick up the bottle and take it with her.

“But I’m not telling you anything you don’t know.”

“Or anything you haven’t said before.” He stepped off the treadmill’s belt and dried perspiration from the back of his neck as he paced the confines of the room, ignoring the spectacular view of the Mississippi River.

Aviana could have waited a few more hours before dialing his number—at least long enough for him to have had coffee, or better, a Bloody Mary.

She sighed. “I continue to hope that you might reform your ways.”

At this stage of his life, he doubted it was even possible. “Is the only purpose of this unwanted interruption to highlight my numerous flaws?”

“There’s not enough time for that.”

He imagined her dismissively waving her hand.

“I’m offering you a friendly warning.”

He doubted the *friendly* part.

“I don’t like it when innocents are destroyed in your wake.”

Her accusation infuriated him, and his temper strained against the tight leash he kept it on. “You’re underestimating her.”

“Not at all. I see her strength, but I know what she’s been through.”

The intentional barb found its mark. He knew nothing about who his assistant was. And until now, maybe it hadn’t mattered.

“I’m also aware she has a heart.”

Heart? What did that have to do with anything? “I assure you Ms. Robbins was a consenting adult.” The club’s security cameras would prove his point.

“To the scene, yes. Otherwise I would have bounced your ass out of there. But as to everything else?”

“What the fuck do you know about my life or relationship to...” The provocative submissive? His assistant? He finally settled on, “Ms. Robbins?”

“I know who she is to you.” When she went on, the reprimand in her sharp tone rang crystal clear. “There’s an unequal power dynamic between you, and I see you manipulating her, using your authority to your advantage.”

Fuck off. On one hand, Frost respected that she looked out for all the club’s participants. On the other he resented her meddling in his life. “Anything else, Milady?”

“Lines exist for a reason. They shouldn’t be blurred.”

He planned to eradicate them entirely.

Last night, Kaylee had seemed like the answer to his Christmas Eve dilemma, and this morning he was even more convinced.

Or maybe he *was* selfish.

Now that he’d sampled the delicious sweetness of her juices on his tongue, he wouldn’t stop until he tasted her again.

“When she leaves your employment, which she is certainly smart enough to do, tell her to look me up.”

A poker of hot fire stabbed his gut. “Are you trying to poach my employees, Aviana?”

“Not at all.” She paused for maximum drama before laughing and continuing, “She’ll leave of her own volition.”

“Hands off.”

“That sounds a little possessive, Frost.”

This time he said it aloud. “Fuck off.”

“Merry Christmas to you as well.” Before he could respond, she was gone.

He wadded his towel and threw it at the laundry basket in the corner. She accused him of manipulating Kaylee, blurring the lines between work and D/s. But wasn’t Aviana using her position as the club’s owner to tell him what to do?

As always, the Domme behaved as if the rules didn’t apply to her.

Annoyed with her as well as the interruption to his routine, he resumed his run, this time at a more punishing speed.

Much as he hated—even refused—to admit it, Aviana made excellent points.

But the problem was, he no longer had a conscience. Life had seen to that.

After slowing to a jog, then a quick walk, he ended his workout and headed to the shower. He’d see Kaylee soon, and he looked forward to it.

Last night, into the wee hours of the morning, Kaylee had haunted his thoughts and dreams, and he’d gotten out of bed to masturbate.

Only then had he been able to sleep.

Now, as he stripped off his damp workout shorts, his cock was hard again.

Since jacking off before picking her up was probably a good idea, he stepped beneath the warm spray of a shower and fisted himself.

Images of Kaylee returned to him: her pretty pink nipples beading to hard nubs as he looked at her.

Her lush breasts had filled his palms, and her curvy hips were the stuff of fantasies.

After spanking her, he'd teased her clit. Filling her tight pussy with his fingers, denying himself and channeling all that energy into pleasing her, had been pure joy. Then her sweet whimpers as she'd reached orgasm fulfilled something deeply masculine within him.

Frost craved more of her, even if he shouldn't—as Aviana pointed out.

Determinedly he shoved her warnings into the deepest recesses of his mind. He wanted Kaylee—and he damn well intended to have her.

His cock throbbed with ever-increasing demand, and he squeezed himself harder, stroking faster as he imagined Kaylee squirming beneath his larger body, crying out his name as he drove into her.

This morning, the image of her was every bit as strong and powerful as it'd been when they were playing, so evocative he'd swear the soft scent of her, warm vanilla and innocence, was floating on the air.

Evan braced one palm on a tile on the far side of the shower stall as the fantasy consumed him.

His movements becoming more frantic, he spilled his hot seed in a long ribbon of cum.

Though his hunger temporarily slackened, thoughts of her refused to go away. Impossibly his cock stayed hard.

Annoyed as hell at his mind's inability to control his body's reactions, he ordered Jolly, the whole-house computer, to turn off the hot water entirely.

But even being blasted by an arctic-like chill didn't tame his raging hard on.

Fuck.

It had been years since he'd been so consumed with thoughts of a woman. And that they were for his pretty assistant pissed him off.

He knew plenty of women who'd be happy to fuck him in exchange for dinner and being photographed with him, but no one except her would do.

Frost twisted the knob, then shucked the water from his body before wrapping a towel around his waist.

He had to focus on something other than getting his dick inside his fake wife. After shaving, he asked Jolly for a time check.

"It's eight fifteen a.m. Central time, Frosty."

He squeezed his eyes shut. First Aviana, and now this nonsense nickname from Jolly who'd been designed by the genius himself, Julien Bonds. Bonds always thought he was clever, and this wasn't the first time the system had come up with something ridiculously cutesy. The man called this particular version of the machine a chief of staff, and its benefits were legendary, but so were the annoying quirks. "Call me that one more time and you're going to be reprogrammed."

A loud sigh filled the room. “*Again?*”

“If you’d remember the name’s Frost, it wouldn’t be necessary.”

“*Of course, Frosty.*”

Jesus. The only thing saving the morning was the fact he’d be seeing Kaylee soon. “Make me a cup of coffee. Extra hot. Splash of heavy whipping cream.”

“*Anything for you, dreamboat.*”

On second thought, maybe being called Frosty wasn’t all that bad.

He dressed in his usual weekend wear: slacks, dress shirt with cuff links, running shoes—but definitely not the hideous ones that Bonds represented.

Today Evan added a pair of tight boxers. Keeping his reactions under control around Kaylee was difficult at best, and after last night, it might be impossible.

By the time he jogged down the stairs, the coffee was steaming and waiting. Which was part of the reason he put up with Jolly and Bonds.

“*Jennings is scheduled for nine thirty.*”

His chauffeur.

“*The housekeeping service confirmed their ten o’clock arrival. And your grandmother’s Christmas bouquets will be delivered tomorrow.*”

“Thank you.”

After a few fortifying sips of the brew—which was perfect—Evan made himself a vile-tasting, but nutrient-packed, protein drink.

“Would you like me to have your grandmother’s Christmas present delivered to your office?”

He thought about it for a moment. “No.”

“Directly to her home?”

“I’ll pick it up.” Which meant a stop at the Maison Sterling sometime in the near future. “Actually call them back and order a second spa package for Kaylee Robbins.”

An electrical buzz hummed over the speakers. Jolly was still online but hadn’t yet responded. “Do I need to repeat the request?”

“Why are you giving your admin such a nice a gift?”

“None of your business.”

Was the question Bonds’s version of prying? The only person who enjoyed meddling more than Aviana was Bonds himself. Not bothering to tamp down his annoyance, he snapped back. “What was my last request?”

“To order a spa package for Ms. Robbins.”

The words sounded a bit petulant. Since that wasn’t really possible, maybe he was projecting. “Be sure Gran’s is wrapped in a nice box. With a bow.”

“Consider it done.”

Next up, as he sat at the head of the long, lonely dining room table drinking a second cup of coffee, his chief of staff read him the contents of two dozen emails, and he dictated his responses. “Anything else?”

“An email just arrived from Brigitte.”

The chairperson of Christoff’s board.

“Shall I send it straight to the trash heap?”

“Tempting. But no. Read it.”

“Recommend another ten percent cut to overhead at the beginning of the year.”

“She can fuck off.”

“Message compiled.”

May not be his most strategic response. “Don’t send.”

“New message?”

“Tell her merry Christmas.” Which was his holiday version of *screw you*. The results he’d delivered so far had been stellar. Brigitte was being greedy. Not that he could blame her. For two years, Christoff had hemorrhaged cash.

Once the rest of his messages had been handled, he instructed Jolly to call Ophelia, his grandmother.

“Ah! My favorite grandson.”

“Only grandson,” he corrected wryly.

“Semantics. Even if I had a dozen, you’d be my favorite.”

He grinned. Their worlds had fallen apart at the same time, yet Gran was there, solid and reassuring. Without her strength, he doubted he’d even have a shred of humanity left.

“I’m looking forward to meeting your...” She paused. “Wife.”

“And Kaylee asked me to let you know she’s anxious to see you on Christmas Eve.”

“That’s her name? Pretty.”

“You’ll like her.”

“I’m sure I will.”

He didn't expect overt enthusiasm, and he didn't get it. After all, Gran had picked out a woman for him—Milena. From his standpoint, there was nothing actually wrong with her. She was pretty enough, interesting enough. Although he'd taken her to dinner twice, she didn't spark a fire inside him. That still hadn't stopped Gran—or Milena—from expecting him to propose.

No matter who he brought to Christmas, Gran would likely be disappointed.

Still, he was counting on Kaylee's friendliness and composure to win over his grandmother.

"Anyway, I'm late for brunch."

Her social schedule was legendary. Meals. Tennis. Bunco. And somehow she managed it around all her volunteer work.

"I love you, Gran."

"Just bring Kaylee to see me."

The moment he ended the call, Jolly spoke. "*Jennings has arrived.*"

Early, which was appreciated since Frost was having a sudden, impetuous idea.

As he headed for the exit, Frost shrugged into a blazer.

Though he usually opted for the private elevator that would whisk him straight to the lobby, he headed for the stairs and took them to the parking garage. Twenty-five flights was a lot, but the energy churning inside him demanded an outlet. "Exiting," he informed Jolly so she could adjust the temperature settings and lock the doors.

He'd moved in only a year ago, at the urging of Bonds. His friend, Kennedy Aldrich, had built the property with all of

Bonds techno sorcery included, and Hawkeye handled all the security. Though he didn't worry about that, a couple of Hollywood stars and a foreign prince had suites in the building. But because he was friends with Bonds, Frost had secured one of the few penthouses. His was a two-story unit with a rooftop garden.

When he reached the garage, his heart rate was up but not significantly.

"Morning, sir." Jennings doffed his hat.

"Jennings." Once he was inside the vehicle, he leaned forward and gave his instructions. "I need flowers."

In the rearview mirror, his driver nodded. "I know just the place."

A few minutes later, he pulled to a stop. Though the shop wasn't open yet, when Jennings joined Frost and knocked on the window, a woman glanced over. A quick smile curved her lips and lit her eyes.

"Sam!" she exclaimed after letting them in.

The burly man picked her up and swung her around. *Well, well.*

When he finally put the squealing, giggling woman back down, Jennings offered the introductions. "My employer, Evan Frost. Mr. Frost, meet Miss Lila Leblanc, owner of Blooming Bayou."

"My pleasure."

"Same. Anything to get Sam to stop in at my shop."

If Frost wasn't mistaken, his driver flushed, but he cleared his throat and turned his head.

“Are you looking for an arrangement? Or perhaps a plant?”

He glanced at Jennings who managed to pull himself back together.

“An arrangement,” the man responded on Frost’s behalf.

“Is there a special occasion?” When he didn’t answer right away, she went on. “An apology, perhaps?”

“No.” Not that Kaylee didn’t deserve that for the long hours he demanded of her. But it had never occurred to him before. In the past, he’d ensured that his girlfriends received flowers on birthdays and dating anniversaries—if they reminded him in advance, which most of them did.

“A budding romance?” Ms. Leblanc suggested.

That wasn’t right either. Was it? “We had an enjoyable evening, and we have a big day ahead.” One that would end with his ring on her finger.

“Any budget I need to be respectful of?”

Again Jennings answered for him. “None.”

“Free rein? Always my favorite.” With a quick nod, Ms. Leblanc crossed to an enormous, industrial-type refrigerator and began putting together all kinds of flowers, most of which he’d never seen before.

In less than a few minutes, she’d created a beautiful arrangement. “I think she’ll like this.”

“Anemones?” Jennings pointed to an off-white bloom. “And I’m guessing peonies?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“The tall ones are eucalyptus.”

Frost blinked. What the hell was it with the people around him being full of surprises?

“You’re learning,” Lila said.

Jennings beamed.

Sam Jennings was a flower expert? With a romance of his own? How much of what went on around him was Frost unaware of?

In short order, they were back on the road, and he’d still be a couple of minutes early.

When they arrived, Jennings took the box from the back and handed them to Frost.

“Can you ensure we have mimosas waiting?” he asked the chauffeur.

“Of course, sir.”

Two at a time, Frost climbed the steps to her apartment.

Moments after he rang the bell, she answered.

The elf from last night was gone, but his assistant was also nowhere in sight. Instead, her dark blonde hair was loose around her shoulders. A flowy skirt flirted with her ankles, and a sweater hugged her chest. She’d opted for a pair of shoes with heels that weren’t quite stilettos, but were more than sexy enough to ensnare his complete attention.

Last night’s scent of vanilla was replaced with something every bit as alluring—a fresh breeze and a gentle hint of surrender. He ached to pull her against him and drink in her tantalizing scent.

He knew what lay beneath her feminine clothing, and his cock began to harden again. “Morning, Ms. Robbins.”

When he offered the enormous box, her eyes widened.

“I’m...” Then she frowned. “What is this?”

“Go ahead and open it.”

She severed the connection of their gazes. “Would you like to come in?”

Though she was unfailingly polite, her back was rigid, not inviting any type of familiarity. In fact, she’d retreated into the same cloak of professionalism that she hid behind at work.

Frost wanted to crack through her veneer, once again hear her whimper his name and call him Sir. Instead, he nodded.

When they were sealed inside, he was tempted to kiss her, but she made a quick escape.

With a resigned shrug, he followed her deeper into the small yet comfortable-looking space with its oversize couch. In front of it was a large television in the center of a built-in wall unit, and a wooden coffee table stacked with magazines occupied the center of the room.

He moved in closer and noticed a business book nearby. Intrigued, he picked it up. *How to Read Financial Statements*. Several pages were turned back. “Always learning?”

“Eventually I’d like to get my MBA.”

Obviously she had higher aspirations than working for him. Why that thought irritated him, he had no idea. Maybe because Aviana had planted the annoying seed and Kaylee was watering it.

After placing her gift on the bar-like area separating the kitchen from the living area, Kaylee looked over at him.

As he replaced the book, he nodded his assent.

She tugged open the big red velvet bow securing the box, then lifted the lid and gasped. “Oh my God. These are gorgeous.” She twirled a finger over one of the blooms. “How did you know peonies are my absolute favorite flower?”

Her joy pleased him immensely.

“But they’re not in season.”

Flowers had a season?

She exhaled. “They’re absolutely exquisite, but I would have preferred that you save the money or give somebody at work a raise.”

His Kaylee was always thinking of others...and finances. “I understand your sentiment. I used my personal funds for the bouquet, not the business account.”

“Of course.” She turned a pretty shade of pink, matching one of the blossoms.

As he’d discovered last night, he liked making her blush.

“These... They’re...” She stammered as she looked at him. “Really, you shouldn’t have done this. It’s far too extravagant.”

“A simple thank you would suffice.”

“But...” She looked from him to the bouquet, then back again, her luscious pink lips parted slightly. “Thank you. I’m afraid you overwhelmed me, and I forgot my manners.”

He hoped to do that many more times in the future.

“They really are gorgeous.”

“I’m delighted you’re pleased.”

“Still—”

He held up a finger. “I enjoyed last night tremendously.”

“Look, Mr. Frost, you don’t owe me anything, gratitude”—she narrowed her eyes—“or an apology.”

“Stop.” He bit back his irritation. “Can’t I do something nice for you?”

“Not if you have ulterior motives, no.”

“Are you this suspicious with everyone? Or is it just me?”

She blinked several times and turned away. Hiding from him?

“I promise you; I did this out of the goodness of my heart.” His statement was a damn lie. Between the actions of his father and Greta, his former fiancée, there was no goodness remaining in his heart. Life had been a harsh instructor, so he did nothing without calculating the costs—emotional as well as financial—and all the potential outcomes. He had no intention of allowing her to back out of their agreement.

Finally, with a nod, she crossed into the kitchen, then crouched to grab a vase from underneath the sink. After filling the glass container with water, she spent time arranging the blossoms, then carried the whole thing into the living room and placed it on the coffee table.

“They’re cheery.” She seemed to consider the placement. “And brighten up the whole space, making it seem a little festive.”

Something lacking in both of their lives.

“Let me grab my coat and purse.”

While she walked down the hallway, he took the opportunity to learn more about her and wandered over to the wall unit. She had a few knickknacks there, but mostly it was

crammed full of framed photographs. As if he had every right to intrude on her privacy, he picked one up that showed her with other people—three young kids, Kaylee, and a woman who looked uncannily like her, along with a couple who might have been her parents.

When she cleared her voice behind him, he turned, still holding the snapshot, unapologetic at being caught snooping. “Your family?”

“Yes.”

The flatness of her tone did not invite further questions, but that didn’t deter him. “You all look happy.”

“We were.” A smile ghosted across her features. “Or pretended to be.”

She’d revealed more than he anticipated, and he waited for her to go on.

“The man in the picture is my father. Or, if you prefer to get technical, my stepfather.” She shrugged. “Since he was more of a dad than my sperm donor ever was, I simply called him Dad.”

“Called?”

She moved in closer to him and pointed to the right side of the picture. “That’s my younger sister. On the other side of Mom and Dad are my half-siblings. There’s quite an age difference between me and Loree and the rest of the kids.”

“Loree? She’s the one who is getting married?”

“You remembered.”

He hated that she sounded shocked.

“At first Mom wasn’t sure that she wanted to have a second family, especially since we were almost grown. But she was so much in love with Dad that it was natural.” She shrugged. “We were all one, big happy family.”

“I envy you that.”

She blinked up at him. “Do you?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re an only child?”

Her honesty made him want to share as well. “I wonder if or how things would have been different if that wasn’t the case.”

“What-ifs are dangerous.” Suddenly her light-gold eyes flooded with tears. With a tiny, regret-filled smile, she explained. “My dad died recently.”

The anguish in her words cut through him. He had no idea how long ago it had been, but the loss seemed new.

He winced on her behalf. All too well, he knew how the smallest memory could rush that emotion back to the surface. At times, the loss of his mother felt as if it had happened months—rather than years—ago.

“It was a long, awful descent that left my mom destitute.”

Frost scowled.

“Medical bills, funeral expenses...”

“No insurance?”

“Not enough, and times were tight, so they never had money for extras like burial funds. And seriously, he was young. No one expected anything like this. They thought they

had years left to figure out that kind of thing.” She exhaled. “I help out as much as I can. But it’s never enough.”

“Why did I not know any of this?”

“I had no reason to tell you.” She lifted a shoulder as if her response should have been obvious. “He passed right before you took over. Sylvia was more than understanding and generous with my time off needs in the final weeks.”

Another barb about how wonderful her previous boss had been. In the same situation, no doubt he’d have made as many accommodations as he could have. Yet business was business. And as he well knew, Sylvia’s generosity had left the business teetering on the verge of insolvency.

“I keep expecting that the loss of my dad will get easier, but it doesn’t.”

Her voice had turned shaky, perhaps from repressed emotion.

“Anyway, we have work to do.” She shook her head as if to clear it. “And I’d like to get on with it so I have some time to finish my laundry and do my chores.” She took the photo from him and returned it to the precise spot that he’d found it.

Wishing he could vanquish the emotional distance between them, he led the way to the door and opened it for her. With a tight nod of acknowledgment, she preceded him down the stairs.

As always, Jennings was holding open the back door, and she smiled sunnily at the chauffeur. “Morning, Mr. Jennings.”

For a moment, Frost wondered if she’d ever look at him with that kind of genuine, unforced warmth. Last night, she’d been responsive to him, but she’d been in a passionate, endorphin-fed state of mind.

“Good to see you, ma’am.”

“I’d prefer it if you’d call me Kaylee.”

Frost curled his hand into a fist. Not even last night had she invited him to do that.

She slid onto the backseat and scooted toward the far door, putting as much distance between them as possible.

God almighty. One step forward, several back.

Once Frost slid in beside her, Jennings closed the door, and Frost picked up one of the stemless flutes and offered it to her.

“We’re having mimosas?”

“We are.” He tipped his glass toward hers. “I’ll open a celebratory bottle of champagne after my ring is on your finger.”

“A *temporary* ring,” she corrected him.

Frost exhaled his frustration. Did everything have to be a struggle?

Only after she’d issued her correction did she accept his invitation to clink their beverages together.

As Jennings smoothly accelerated toward downtown, she took a sip. “Oh my word.”

“You approve?”

“This is not made with a ten-dollar bottle of bubbly.”

“No. It’s not.” He grinned.

“Aren’t you supposed to use the cheap stuff when you add orange juice to it?”

“That’s the recommendation, yes.”

“Well, after tasting this, I respectfully disagree.”

“Someplace we have common ground.”

By the time they reached the French Quarter, tension seemed to have drained from her shoulders. He hoped that meant the shopping excursion would go well.

After parking, Sam hurried around to open the vehicle door.

On the sidewalk, she paused to look around. Streetlamps were decorated with garland and wrapped with thick red ribbon, and wreaths were hung in the storefront’s plate glass windows. “This looks expensive.”

“I could hardly take you to a strip-mall jeweler.”

“You most certainly could have. And should have.”

Greta had turned her nose up even at this fancy location.

“You will be able to return it, right? After the sham is over?”

Sham? The word and her emphasis on it both rankled.

Struggling to restrain the flare of his temper, he strode to the Charme du Vieux Carré’s door and pressed the bell that was tucked away to the right.

“They’re not open?”

“Not on Sundays, no.”

“Rules don’t apply to you, Mr. Frost?”

“We’re going to be married—”

“Pretend married.”

“So you should call me Evan.”

Her lips parted, but any response was forestalled by the proprietress’s arrival.

“Evan!” Breezily, Isabelle kissed each of his cheeks while Kaylee looked on, blinking at the sight.

Distracted from his annoyance, he returned Isabelle’s greeting. “You look radiant.” And she did.

Though she didn’t appear to be over forty, she was somewhere past seventy-five. Her hair hung to midback, and her black dress floated to the floor. Her jewelry, in custom-created, classic pieces, was understated.

“Come in, both of you.”

Moments later, she turned the lock behind them.

“You must be Ms. Robbins.” Isabelle extended her hand. “Welcome to Charme du Vieux Carré.”

“It’s...” As the two greeted one another, Kaylee glanced around. “Amazing.”

“We’ve been here for forty years.”

“I can see why. Elegant, classy, yet comfortable.”

“Are you in marketing?”

Kaylee laughed. Had he ever heard that sound before?

“No. Just commenting on the vibe I’m getting. The flowers, the tree with the gifts beneath, the plush chairs that invite people to relax.”

Isabelle’s eyes twinkled. “That’s more about being smart. Sometimes customers take much longer to browse than their companions are expecting. If they have a place to unwind with a whiskey or bubbly, they’re less likely to interrupt a potential purchase.”

“That’s smart,” Kaylee acknowledged. “At any rate, thank you for accommodating us on your day off.”

Isabelle smiled at him. “All he ever has to do is ask.”

A man who Isabelle introduced as Jean Claude joined them from the back room. “May we offer you champagne? Coffee?”

“Thank you, but I don’t want to put you to any trouble,” was Kaylee’s unsurprising reply.

“Having a beverage makes everyone more comfortable.” Isabelle’s contradiction was soft and hospitable yet firm.

“In that case, coffee for me, please.”

Frost nodded. “Same.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re looking for?” Isabelle asked Kaylee.

“Something inexpensive.”

As if there was anything in this store that fit that description. Dismissively Frost waved his hand, earning him an icy glare from his fake fiancée. “My grandmother will have certain expectations.”

“Absolutely she will,” Isabelle agreed.

Kaylee sighed deeply. “How about a plain band?”

“Again, this is about Gran’s expectations,” he cut in.

“In that case, *darling*,”—there was a bite in Kaylee’s voice—“why don’t you and Isabelle select something you both think your grandmother will find suitable?”

“You’ll be the one wearing it.” Frost attempted not to let his annoyance drip from his words.

“Jewelry is very personal.” Isabelle kept her tone neutral, and he couldn’t tell if she was trying to soothe him or Kaylee. But she looked at Kaylee directly. “I think you should have something you like.”

“I had it, once.” Pain ghosted in her eyes, turning them to dark gold. “This time it doesn’t matter.”

Another glimpse of her past, one he had no idea about. Had Kaylee been engaged? Maybe even married? *Shit*. This was something he should know about her.

“Why don’t you come with me?” Isabelle suggested.

At that moment, Jean Claude rolled out a cart. The top shelf held bottled water, porcelain cups, cream, sugar, and sweeteners. There was also a three-tiered platter filled with small pastries and every kind of cookie imaginable.

“If you’ll excuse us, Evan?”

While Isabelle guided Kaylee to the far side of the shop, he shrugged helplessly and plucked a cranberry scone from the platter and accepted a coffee that Jean Claude poured from a silver carafe.

Across the store, the two ladies conversed before browsing through several cases of empty settings. Then maybe ten minutes later, Kaylee slipped on a metal ring to check her size.

Eventually Isabelle nodded. Then they rejoined him. Thank God because curiosity about their private conversation had been driving him mad, and he was about to devour a petit four.

“I think we have an idea of what to consider.”

He’d had no doubts as to Isabelle’s skill in handling Kaylee’s objections. And maybe fears? What the hell had happened in her past?

“But she’d like your input.”

That surprised—and delighted—him. “Of course.” At least he wasn’t completely useless, mere window dressing, while

the ladies made all the decisions.

Such a different experience from shopping with Greta who'd asked for the stones first, zeroed in on the most expensive, then decided she wanted additional diamonds on the sides and dozens more on the two bands that would wrap her engagement ring.

Jean Claude poured two more coffees, and Kaylee moved a chocolate chip cookie onto a plate. She broke it in half, then into quarters. And she only ate one.

“Since Kaylee is petite, we’re thinking about an oval stone, a classic solitaire, with a knife-edge, platinum band.”

“Excellent.”

“And I’m sure you’d like a choice in the diamond, Evan?”

“I would.”

After they finished their coffee, and Kaylee had another chunk of her cookie, Isabelle crossed into the back room. A few moments later, she emerged with a tray of radiant jewels.

Kaylee shook her head frantically. “These are all too big.”

“They are completely appropriate,” Frost corrected.

Ignoring him, Kaylee looked at Isabelle. “He can return it next week, right?”

Jesus. This confounding, argumentative woman. “It won’t be returned.”

Mutinously she set her jaw and looked at him. “In that case, I insist on a smaller stone.”

He clenched his back teeth. What the hell had he been thinking when he’d suggested she be his fake wife? That she’d

quietly go along with all his suggestions? That this would be easy?

“Kaylee has a point.” Isabelle’s tone was soothing. “On her hand, the stone may look bigger than you expect.”

Was Isabelle part counselor? Maybe a referee?

While Jean Claude returned the large-carat diamonds to the back, Isabelle sipped from a bottle of water.

A few minutes later, the man brought out a different tray and placed it on top of a display case.

“Is there something here you might like, Kaylee?”

Of course she pointed to a few of the smaller stones.

“Excellent choices.” Isabelle nodded, then offered her jeweler’s loupe to him. “I’m certain you’d like to examine them, Evan?”

“I would.” A few minutes later, he’d narrowed the selection to one uniquely perfect diamond.

Kaylee slipped on an empty setting and Isabelle gently fit the stone between the prongs. As Kaylee moved her finger, light refracted in a million directions. “Wow. This is...” She glanced at him.

Fucking stunning. As if it belonged there.

What the hell was wrong with him?

He was a bastard who planned to never risk his heart again. Even the thought of marriage or love was off limits.

So why in the fuck was he standing here, dumbfounded, staring at her, his desire for her slamming into a need to possess her forever?

And worse, why was he so damn obsessed with the determination to act on that urge?

CHAPTER FIVE



For the space of a heartbeat, nothing more, connection sparked between him and Kaylee. Then she blew out a breath and looked away.

“Spectacular,” Isabelle approved, breaking the spell. “The ring was made for you. It couldn’t be more perfect.”

No matter how he tried, Frost couldn’t keep his opinion to himself. “It would be better if it had a bigger diamond.”

Both women scowled at him. Reluctantly he admitted he probably deserved that.

“Anything more might overwhelm her hand.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take.” Why the hell was this so important to him?

Though Isabelle’s reprimand was light, steely force laced it. “The most important thing is Kaylee’s happiness, Evan.”

If the ring were something she was going to wear for the rest of her life, a symbol of their shared commitment, he’d have pressed his point. And maybe he could talk her into something larger at a later date.

“Would you like a wedding band to go with this?”

“Yes,” Frost said.

“No,” Kaylee corrected immediately.

Once again, Isabelle was the picture of calm. “Many brides are opting to forgo bands entirely. This is so stunning it doesn’t need any accompaniment. Anniversary bands can be added at any time.”

Which was something he could tell his grandmother he was planning to do later. “Fine,” he agreed, even if he didn’t enjoy continually being thwarted.

“You can pick this up in a few hours,” Isabelle promised. “Go, have lunch. Enjoy the city sights.”

Kaylee shook her head. “You’ve already been far too generous with your time today. Tomorrow is soon enough.”

“I won’t hear of it.” Isabelle’s tone was resolute, and he echoed the sentiment. This needed to happen today.

“Just give me a call. We have lunch reservations.”

“We do?” Kaylee asked as Isabelle plucked the precious gem from its metal cradle and slid the empty setting from her finger.

“At the Bourbon Brasserie.”

Instead of smiling her delight, Kaylee folded her arms, silently expressing her opinion of his choice. Was another argument brewing between them?

After finishing up with Isabelle and Jean Claude, he and Kaylee stepped outside the store, and he addressed her reaction straight up. “Do you have objections to my choice of restaurant?”

“Besides the price and stuffy atmosphere?”

Despite himself, a smile tugged at his lips. “*Stuffy?* The place is one of the most highly regarded in the Crescent City.” And boasted a Michelin-rated chef. He’d called himself to get the reservations instead of having Jolly take care of the booking.

“I’d rather go somewhere else.”

Greta had loved being seen at Bourbon Brasserie while the beautiful, defiant woman in front of him provided one surprise after another. But practicing being the thoughtful husband his grandmother would expect, Frost overrode his instincts and instead asked, “What would you prefer?”

“Grandma’s Kitchen. Do you know it?”

“I’ve been there once.” For the premier of Mason and Hannah Sullivan’s home improvement show. The historic restaurant was a locals’ favorite, famous for its homestyle cooking in a laid-back atmosphere. Wasn’t his first—or even second—choice after visiting a high-end jewelry store and selecting an engagement ring, but having Kaylee Robbins in his life meant he had to learn to compromise.

“Well, then you know how good it is.”

He couldn’t argue with that. It was also noisy and crowded, and it certainly wasn’t a foodie’s delight like the Bourbon.

Since the restaurant Kaylee wanted wasn’t within walking distance, he sent a message to Jennings before tapping a button on his Bonds watch and instructing his chief of staff to cancel their lunch reservations.

Kaylee tipped her head to one side.

“My other assistant,” he explained. “Known as Jolly.”

She laughed. “In honor of Christmas?”

“No. It’s not a name I would have ever selected.” He preferred something a little more elegant. “I’m afraid that’s another of Bonds’s attempts at humor.”

“Bonds? As in Julien Bonds? The genius himself?”

After his experiences with Jolly’s personality—such as it was—Frost wasn’t sure he’d call the man a genius. “He’s an acquaintance, nothing more.”

“Who are you, Mr. Frost? A man of mystery?”

“That’s why we’re spending time together.” Intentionally he leaned toward her. “So you can find out.”

Her breath caught, and the sound elated him. Last night, he’d uncovered a few of her secrets, and he planned to discover even more.

When they reached the restaurant and exited the vehicle, Kaylee invited the driver to join them for lunch. “I think you’d enjoy it, Mr. Jennings. The desserts are amazing.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Jennings tipped his hat. “But I already ate.”

In a million years, it wouldn’t have occurred to Frost to ask that question.

The interior of the restaurant was loud, with Zydeco Christmas music rocking through the atmosphere. Though the place was ridiculously crowded, the hostess greeted Kaylee by name and gave her a huge hug before grabbing two menus.

“You finally break away from that asshole boss of yours long enough to sit down for a while? I swear you’ve lost weight since he took over.”

“Ah...” Kaylee flushed once more. “Uhm, Julie? This is Mr. Frost.”

“The asshole boss,” he clarified.

Showing zero remorse, she looked him in the eye. “Hope you’re paying. She deserves it.”

His assistant certainly inspired loyalty in people. Made him wonder if he did the same.

“Sweet tea, light ice?” Julie asked.

“That will work.” Loosening the belt around her coat, Kaylee slid onto the bench on one side of the booth. “Thanks for remembering.”

“And for you, awful boss?”

He took a seat on the opposite side of the table. The uncomfortable wood certainly didn’t encourage patrons to linger. “Do you have a wine list?”

“Red, white, or rosé?”

“Those are my only options?”

“Not at all.” She smiled sunnily. *Triumphantly?* “Two more. Take ‘em or leave ‘em.”

Between Kaylee and her friend, this day was a challenge. And at the Bourbon, the wine list was at least ten pages long. “How about a beer?”

“Those we’ve got.”

Things were looking up. “Something Christmasy?” Or was it sold out for him?

“Hoppy Holidays?”

“That’ll work.”

“I’ll let your server know.” Julie stared at him. “And tell her to bring you the bill.”

“Sorry about that.” Kaylee shrugged out of her coat as she offered an explanation. “She and I used to go out a couple of times a month, but lately I’ve been a bit busy.”

“I’m told your boss is demanding.”

Shrugging, she slid her menu to one side. “At least he pays overtime.”

“About your time off request...”

“You can’t be taking that away from me.” Her face paled. “I agreed to all of your terms.”

Fuck. Did she see him as that much of an ogre? “I’m simply curious about where the ceremony is.”

“On the East Coast. She’s in medical school. Third year.”

“Intelligence clearly runs in the family.”

“We’re really proud of her.” She beamed. “And we like her future husband—who is also in med school. So that’s a bonus. But right now, even though she received scholarships, she’s relying on student loans.”

Like she no doubt had as well.

“I paid for my mom and siblings to fly out and rented a house for them. Since it’s been so stressful for everyone, I felt as if they deserved to get away. Forget everything they’ve been through, you know? And having the family there will mean the world to my sister.”

His brilliant assistant ensured everyone else was taken care of before even considering the possibility she could also attend?

The soft sound of her voice brought him back to the present. “Loree and Joshua might have had the ceremony here in New Orleans, except she’s already flown back and forth so much with Dad’s illness, and then...” She attempted a brave smile.

The server delivered their beverages and asked if they were ready to order.

Kaylee asked for crawfish étouffée and then looked at him. “Do you want to share a platter of deep-fried okra as an appetizer?”

“Sure.” As he nodded, Frost was certain his arteries were clogging.

“For you, sir?”

At least he was no longer being called a jerk.

“Gumbo.”

“Seafood? Or chicken and sausage?”

“Seafood.” Was there any other choice this close to the Gulf of Mexico?

When they were alone once more, he picked up the golden-orange colored brew with its frothy head. The first sip made him glad he’d skipped having wine. This ale was every bit as crisp and citrusy as he hoped—an excellent surprise. “Please, go on with your story.”

“Nothing much to add.”

“Do you always put yourself last?”

A puzzled frown burying itself between her delicately shaped eyebrows, she looked at him. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You made sure everyone else is going.”

“Family matters,” she said simply.

To honorable people, it did.

“At any rate, it means a lot that I get to be there as well. She wants me to be her maid of honor. So thank you.”

No matter what cost she had to pay?

“Since I’ll be meeting your grandmother, I want to know all about her.” She tipped her head to one side. “Especially why you need to lie to her.”

It was the second time she’d used that word to describe his actions. And it annoyed the fuck out of him now too. But since his gran would no doubt ensure no details of his life were left unexplored, he figured he’d give Kaylee a heads-up. “I was engaged once.”

Though she blinked, she said nothing.

“Greta. From a good family. My parents were friends with another couple, and she was their daughter. We grew up together. Everyone assumed we’d get married, including us. After college, I proposed. She accepted.”

Focused on him, Kaylee stirred her straw in her drink.

“You haven’t done a web search on my life?”

“Why would I? When I get off work, I try not to think about it again.”

“Then you don’t know about the scandal?”

“*Scandal?*” she echoed.

For a time, he believed it was the only thing people talked about. But maybe she wasn’t as obsessively focused on gossip rags.

Because he still didn't like to talk about the event, he kept the details vague. "Dad lost his company and the family fortune."

"Oh my God."

"The stress of having her home foreclosed on and having their vehicles taken away—not to mention artwork and heirlooms—destroyed my mother, and she had a heart attack."

"Oh, Mr. Frost..."

Waving off her sympathy, he took a long drink of his ale. Memories rankled and burned when he allowed them to surface, so he preferred to keep them buried where they couldn't cause further damage.

"Did your fiancée leave you over this?"

"Once the money was gone, so was she." But Kaylee, with her fierce protectiveness, would no doubt have stood by his side. "No loss, in retrospect."

"And what about your father... Will he be at the dinner?"

He shook his head. "No invitation has been extended."

"So you're estranged?"

Her question was an assumption with no judgment in it, which he appreciated. "Yes. Gran has not forgiven him for her only child's death."

"That has to be difficult for her. And for you."

"If he showed remorse, it might be different." He shrugged. "But he expects me to continue to provide for him."

Her mouth opened before she quickly shut it again.

"I bought him a cabin in Alaska, and he never leaves it. Instead he spends most of his time with a bottle of whiskey

and blaming everyone else for his troubles.” Frost had little sympathy for cowards.

A basket filled with warm, buttered bread arrived, and he was grateful for the interruption.

“I shouldn’t.” She studied the small loaf for a moment.

“You most certainly should.” He adored her curves, and he had a few ideas of how they could burn some calories later if she was interested.

“In that case, all right. You talked me into it.” She broke off a piece and moved it onto a plate which she extended toward him.

“Always thinking of others.” Which made him doubly happy he’d given her what she wanted last night.

Only after he accepted her offering did she choose a slice for herself.

Though he didn’t normally eat bread, he couldn’t resist, and he sank his teeth into the warm, yeasty deliciousness.

She flashed him a quirky smile that changed something inside him, softening him a little. This was a moment he thought they’d never share.

At that moment, the Zydeco band began to play, striking up “Party This Christmas.”

Not long after, the okra was delivered to the table.

“Isn’t this great? And I’m sorry I deprived you of your three-hundred-dollar lunch, but I bet this has more calories, which means you’ll stay full longer.”

“You could be right about that.”

A few minutes later, the rest of the meal arrived.

“How is it?”

“I’ve eaten a lot of gumbo in my life.” Savory but not too spicy, loaded with shrimp, crab, and oysters. “This is probably the best I’ve ever had.”

“Good.” She smiled again. *Fuck*. Her happiness was contagious. Her pleasure made the change of plans worthwhile.

As they ate, a large group of people arrived. Between the music and the shouts of people across tables, conversation became even more difficult. They ended up talking about work more than anything in their personal lives, and her insights about people intrigued him. On some levels, she seemed to know more than the HR department did.

“Are the layoffs over?”

He winced, recalling Brigitte’s earlier message. “Massive ones are.” The board president could fuck off. If she didn’t like the job he was doing, she could bring in another CEO. That would be happening soon enough at any rate. He was the turnaround executive, not the one interested in creating stability and long-term growth. They were very different jobs. “But the hiring freeze is remaining in place.”

“So anyone who leaves will not be replaced.”

“With some exceptions, perhaps.”

“That people who will still have jobs will be a big relief for the rest of the holiday season.”

Even he wasn’t a big enough jackass to fire people on Christmas week, even if that would please Brigitte. “Is that really a concern?”

“It is. A lot of your employees are hoping they will be able to pay their credit card bills next month.”

Including her?

For the first time, he saw the situation from her perspective. Maybe he hadn't communicated well enough, but he'd been focusing on saving the company from insolvency.

When the server returned to the table, Kaylee asked for a container since she'd eaten only half of her meal. Then she ordered a piece of bread pudding with creamy bourbon sauce to go.

His wrist unit vibrated, and when he tapped it, a trumpet blast startled him. A freaking percussion instrument at an ear-splitting decibel? That was a new trick, one he didn't appreciate. Damn Bonds.

“Chief of staff reporting an urgent message.”

“Don't do that again. A gentle chime is enough. Or better, just the vibration.”

“Which you'll ignore, dreamboat.”

He rolled his eyes as Kaylee laughed.

“*Dreamboat?*” she repeated. “That's about the last thing I'd call you.”

His response was wry. “I'm certain it is.”

“Maybe Jolly is being ironic?”

“Thanks for that.” He preferred this more relaxed version of her to the one who showed up at work every day.

“Do you want the message or not?”

“Since you already interrupted, you might as well tell me.”

“The ring is ready.”

There was a brief pause while he met Kaylee’s gaze.

“Who are you marrying?”

“None of your business.” Bonds had customers who actually paid for this intrusive service? Whatever the fee, it was overpriced. “Tell the Genius to quit snooping.”

“Spoilsport. May I tell Jean Claude what time you plan to pick it up? They’re happy to wait for your arrival.”

“It’s supposed to be their day off.” Kaylee’s words held an edge, reminding Frost they were inconveniencing the shop owner and her assistant.

“Twenty minutes. And let Jennings know we’ll be ready for him imminently.”

“Consider it done.”

“Shall we? I’m ready to have my ring on your finger.”

“Does anything stand in your way, Mr. Frost?”

“When I want something?” He looked at her, allowing her to see his seriousness. “No.”

“And when you run into obstacles?”

“Go around them, over, through.” He paused. “Or demolish them.”

“That’s a hard way to live your life.”

“It’s the only way I could have clawed my way back to the top after what my father did to the family business.” Then he went in for the kill. “Are you any different?”

She blinked. “Me?”

“What have you ever allowed to stand in your way? You got an education, a good job. You’re taking care of your family. And quite frankly, I’ve been at the receiving end of you refusing to take no for an answer.”

A furious scowl buried itself between her eyebrows. “I’m not at all like you.”

“Oh you are, just a whole lot more considerate.”

Further conversation was prevented by the arrival of their bill, the packaged dessert, and the to-go container.

Kaylee reached for her wallet. “Let’s split this.”

Anger—sudden, hot, and lethal—pulsed through him. “Absolutely not.” He left the statement at that instead of adding the words that he wanted to. “Put it on this,” he told the server, inviting no further comment from Kaylee.

“Would you like to verify the charges?”

“Not necessary.”

When they were alone, Kaylee leaned forward. “Look, Mr. Frost. Just because Julie said you had to pay for this, it doesn’t mean that—”

He slammed his palm onto the table. “This has nothing to do with Julie.”

“But I can afford—”

“I’m sure you can, but you’re not going to.” Would the stubborn woman have insisted on paying half of the lunch at Bourbon? And had that had anything to do with her vehement objection to one of the city’s finest dining establishments? “Once again, Ms. Robbins, a simple thank you would suffice.”

She exhaled. “Am I an obstacle to you?”

The earnestness in her question dissipated his flash of frustration. “You are anything but. Confounding at times, perhaps. But I’d prefer to think of us as collaborators.”

At his comment, she shook her head. “That’s not possible when everything has to be your way.”

Intentionally he lowered his tone. “If that were true, we wouldn’t be here. And you’d have a much larger diamond.” And he’d refused Brigitte’s demands to continue cutting costs.

Kaylee tipped her head to one side as if acknowledging what he said.

Their server returned with the receipt, thanked them for coming in, then wished them a merry Christmas before moving away.

Frost scrawled his name on the bottom of the paper and added a more-than-generous tip—which he would have done even if Kaylee weren’t studying him so intently.

The fact that she’d watched to ensure he’d take care of the person who had waited on them annoyed the fuck out of him. “I’m no Scrooge.”

“If you say so.”

“Shall we?”

At the host stand, she stopped to give her friend a hug before rejoining him to head outside where Jennings was waiting.

Kaylee turned over the bag containing the restaurant’s signature dessert. “Mr. Frost got this for you.”

“Did he indeed?”

Frost clenched his teeth.

“Very thoughtful of you, sir.” Jennings studied him. “I’m sure I’ll enjoy it.”

Frost swore he smelled the sugar and spice the entire way back to *Charme du Vieux Carré*.

They arrived in less time than he’d promised, and Jean Claude was standing by to let them in.

On the far side of the showroom, Isabelle waited, an open box sitting on the glass counter.

As they neared, the gem beckoned brightly, causing Kaylee to slow her steps slightly.

Even if the diamond was smaller than he preferred, the piece itself was magnificent—as beautiful as his pretend Christmas bride.

Frost plucked the ring from its velvet cushion and was holding the piece when Kaylee reached his side.

“It can stay in the box until we leave for your grandmother’s house.”

Firmly he shook his head. *Absolutely not*. “You need to get comfortable wearing it.”

After a moment, she sighed, capitulating. One of the most rewarding sounds ever.

He lifted her left hand and slid the exquisite piece onto her finger. The ring was perfect, proving her decision had been the right one.

For a moment she stared at her hand before looking up and meeting his gaze. “I can’t believe how...”

She seemed to struggle for words, and he understood all too well. *Meant to be*.

Years ago, he'd proposed to Greta. Even though he was supposed to spend his life with her, they'd been distant from each other during every part of their wedding planning, as if they'd been pacing through required motions. But with Kaylee, an emotional, possessive arc wrapped around his heart.

"*Magnifique.*" Isabelle clapped her hands together, and Jean Claude gave a slow nod.

"It is," Kaylee agreed. "You're very talented."

While Jean Claude placed the box in a small gold bag and tied the handle with a red ribbon, Frost took care of the payment with Isabelle.

The total was less than a quarter of the cost of Greta's ring.

After they all exchanged holiday wishes, Kaylee thanked Isabelle and Jean Claude profusely, saying she appreciated them working on a day off.

He walked outside with Kaylee, and the breeze toyed with a curled lock of her hair. He captured it, then went to tuck it back into place.

Her lips parted, and this time, he could no longer ignore his impulses. He leaned forward, intent on kissing her.

Gaze locked on his, her breath catching, she didn't resist.

Rising onto her tiptoes, she leaned into him, the diamond winking in the watery sun.

She tasted of promise. Of forever, igniting a possessive urge.

As she wrapped her arms around his neck, his cock hardened, pulsing, demanding he mark her as his.

He had to have her, and it had to be *now*. “Come home with me.” *Before I go out of my fucking mind.*

“Mr. Frost...” Her cheeks were red. From the wind? Or from the same desire that flooded him?

“You’ll need to see my place. I’m sure Gran will ask you what you think of it.” It was a ridiculous excuse but the only one he could come up with.

“I...”

Had the kiss affected her as powerfully as it had him? “Say yes, Kaylee.”

“You’re demanding.”

“Get used to it.” Because he intended to ask for everything she had to offer, consequence be damned. “Say yes to me.”

CHAPTER SIX



Frost's soft, undemanding kiss curled Kaylee's toes and sent desire spiraling through her. His gentleness stood in stark contrast to the ruthless man she knew him to be. More than any other man ever, he knew exactly how to coax a response from her. He gave her a taste of what she wanted and then waited.

And now he'd invited her back to his place. Accepting would be pure madness. Playing with him last night had been a huge mistake. Not because the experience hadn't been wonderful, but because it had been one of the best of her entire life. Everything from the way he'd talked to her beforehand to the way he checked on her throughout, giving her things that she hadn't even been aware she craved—including a little harder impact play than usual to an orgasm that had rocked her so intensely it spun her into another world.

His aftercare had been exquisite. And she'd been tempted to stay in his arms for as long as he'd allow. For a wild, impetuous moment, she had wanted him to invite her to go home with him.

But she'd been grateful that her rational mind had asserted itself.

Frost was her boss, and blurring the lines had been a terrible idea.

At home, sleep had eluded her, and she'd had to take a hot bath. When she still tossed and turned, she resorted to masturbating.

Somewhere around two, she'd finally managed some broken rest. She'd woken numerous times, dreaming of him, replaying the scene and imagining ones she still wanted to have.

Not only did Evan Frost—Master Evan Frost—dominate her waking hours, he now filled all the rest of them.

Would they even be able to work together going forward?

As he held her gaze, she mentally shook herself. Sharing the same office space would be impossible if she continued to recall their interchange at the Quarter. And now his ring lay heavy on her finger.

Fire flared in his deep, dark-blue eyes. Once again, she was pulled into the tractor beam of his devastating masculinity.

She knew as well as he did that his suggestion to tour his house was nothing more than a pretext. After all, he could simply describe it to her or email some pictures. So his request to go home with him was about something else entirely. “I have an early morning. My boss demands I show up at work at seven a.m.”

“He sounds like a tyrant.”

“He has his moments.” In the past, she might have seized on that to drive home her point about how difficult he was to work with. But since last night, she'd seen him in a different light. He'd gotten into his role as Santa and been patient with

all the ladies who had fawned over him, and he'd been more than courteous with her.

Today she found out a little bit about his background and heard the raw note of hurt in his voice as he talked about his mother's untimely death. Heaven help her, his expression softened each time he mentioned his grandmother.

The flowers he'd shown up with this morning had been beautiful, and Mr. Jennings seemed to respect Frost. As for Isabelle, Kaylee doubted that the store owner would have opened her shop on a Sunday for just anyone. And the woman seemed to have a genuine fondness for him.

Seeing a different side of him—a more human one—complicated Kaylee's life. Disliking him, thinking of him as an asshole was easier...and a whole lot safer emotionally.

The same hunger that existed between them last night now hung in the air, hot and heavy, fed by his kiss and the glint of her ring.

Not pressing, he continued to regard her. Maybe if he had pushed, it would have been easier to refuse him. But he waited, allowing her inner turmoil to feed itself.

If she went back to her apartment now, she would be restless and needy.

"I'll ensure that you arrive home early," he promised.

Knowing that he didn't expect her to spend the night was the safety net she needed.

Silencing the whispered warnings of her mind, she slowly nodded.

"Is that a yes?"

Of course he would push for verbal consent. “Yes.” Her heart hammered the same way it had last night, with thunderous anticipation.

“Your chariot awaits.”

Belatedly she realized Jennings was waiting for them, and a twinge of guilt assailed her. “Sorry to inconvenience you,” she told him as she slid into the vehicle’s warm interior.

“Not a problem, ma’am.” He cleared his throat. “Miss Kaylee.”

Jennings wended through the traffic of revelers and shoppers and tourists trying to orient their paper maps.

Finally they entered the parking garage at the city’s newest, swankiest building. She’d watched it being built and had seen all the advertising. Commercial space, including a coffee shop, bar, restaurant, fitness center, and high-end shops occupied the first few floors. The next couple offered offices and coworking space, and the upper levels were luxury condominiums.

How he afforded his lifestyle after his father supposedly lost the family business was something that intrigued her.

Jennings pulled to a stop near an elevator and then hustled around to open their door.

After grabbing her leftovers, Frost exited, then offered his hand to Kaylee.

She appreciated his warm, steady grip as well as his gentlemanly consideration. No other man had treated her like this, and she realized it was time to raise the bar in her life. Now that she knew this was possible, she wanted it all the time.

“Go ahead and take the rest of the day off,” Frost told the driver.

“Sir?”

“I’ll take Ms. Robbins home later.”

Jennings frowned. “If you’re sure, sir?”

“He wants you to enjoy your afternoon with pay,” Kaylee added helpfully.

With a helpless sigh, Frost shrugged. “With pay.”

“Thank you very much.” Jennings tipped his hat. “Enjoy your afternoon, sir.” He grinned at Kaylee. “Ma’am.”

“Kaylee,” she corrected again.

“Miss Kaylee.”

At the elevator, Frost pressed his finger to a keypad, and a green light danced from a square, glass-looking panel.

“Facial recognition.”

“Fancy.”

“And secure.”

Once they were sealed inside, he pushed a button labeled PH.

“Does that mean penthouse?” she asked.

“One of three in the building.”

The compartment whisked them to the top floor. She’d read about people who lived like this, but she’d never actually experienced it until now.

The doors opened directly into his home. His security measures made a lot more sense now.

“This is amazing.” His home was enormous, and her entire apartment could easily fit inside the part that she could see. Off to the right was a living area featuring a large couch and four chairs grouped around a fireplace that had a television mounted on the wall above it. In sharp contrast to her home, Frost’s didn’t have a single photograph anywhere.

She glanced to the left at the dining room and the kitchen that lay beyond. Finally he had a bar with a mirrored back and lots of shelves that were fully stocked. Glasses of various shapes—for wine, champagne, martinis, even margaritas—hung from wooden slats attached to the ceiling.

But a bank of windows on the far end of the unit beckoned her. Drawn to them, she took a couple of steps into his condo before stopping. After all, he hadn’t invited her to make herself at home. “May I?”

“Please.”

As he carried her bag from the restaurant into the kitchen to put it in the fridge, Kaylee walked across the hardwood floor, and with each step, the view became more magnificent as the Mississippi filled her vision.

She’d never been so high this close to the river, and she was able to take in an entire swath of the mighty flow. “I had no idea it looked like this, and it seems to go on forever.”

He joined her. “Bonds suggested I look at this condo. One of his friends was the developer. Of course, I refused because I didn’t have the funds at the time.”

Another peek at the man she worked for.

“No one gets away with telling Bonds no. He insisted I at least take a tour while it was still under construction. At the point the real estate agent brought me up here, the place was

really rough, not much more than studs and beams. There's something about wearing a hardhat that makes it difficult to envision the finished project, even with blueprints and artist's renderings. But when I saw this panorama..."

"You had to have it," she guessed.

"Yeah. Wasn't an option."

Intrigued, hungry for more information even though she was being nosy, she looked at him. "So how did you manage it?"

"The ridiculous number of millions of dollars, you mean?"

"I don't mean to be so crass. But..." She was already this far in. "Yes."

"Bonds was an investor in the building. And selling the penthouses for record-setting prices was a surefire way to garner interest in the property."

"Makes for big headlines in the business news."

"As well as feature articles. Bonds pointed out I could garner press that would refocus on my career rather than the loss of the family business."

"Did it?"

"Bastard is astute." He shrugged. "Anyway, it required loans. One from my grandmother and another from Bonds himself—at a fucking usurious rate," he admitted. "Self-serving asshole."

Something he had in common with the genius? "There's a reason he's a billionaire."

"I worked my ass off to pay him back."

“I’m curious how you’ve accomplished so much in so little time.”

“Are you?”

His tone was noncommittal. Part of her was surprised he hadn’t shut down the conversation. “You got my life story out of me earlier. Fair’s fair. And after all, your grandmother will expect that I know your history.”

A small smile toyed with his lips. “Now you’re playing the Gran card?”

Saying that he wanted to keep his grandma happy had certainly worked to his advantage so far. “Again, fair’s fair.” She shrugged. “It’s effective; I have to admit.”

“Indeed it is. I’ll show you around.”

She followed him back to the entry.

“Let’s make you comfortable.”

Had he intentionally laced his words with sensuality? When she looked at him, desire was banked in his eyes. Who knew the man she thought of as cold actually possessed this kind of passion?

After she placed her purse on a table near the elevator doors, he helped her to remove her coat, which he hung in a closet alongside the blazer that he shrugged out of.

“I was going to offer you champagne, but for the room I want to show you, something warm might be better.”

His comment intrigued her. “Oh?”

“Coffee?”

“As appealing as that sounds, I didn’t sleep well last night, so I think I shouldn’t have any more caffeine.”

“Did something keep you awake?”

Heat crept through her body.

“Perhaps the same thing that prevented me from getting much rest?”

Was he serious?

“A hot scene with an alluring elf kept going through my mind.”

The knowledge she’d had some impact on him rocked her. “Well, Santa wasn’t so bad himself.”

Though they shared grins in an intimate, easy exchange, the idea that he’d had an equally challenging night thrilled her.

“I have decaf. Or maybe even hot chocolate. I’m sure I can figure out how to make cocoa. How hard can it be?”

“Do you have the ingredients?” she asked. “Cocoa, milk, sugar, salt?”

“I’m sure the household manager thought of that. The pantry is well stocked. Or so I’m told.”

“You have all those ingredients,” Jolly chimed in. *“Along with vanilla.”*

“No one asked you,” Frost responded.

Jolly let out a loud *harrumph*. *“I beg to differ. The person who is presumably going to be your wife did. And if logic follows, her name is Kaylee Robbins.”*

Frost’s mouth opened, and then he snapped it shut again.

Nonplussed, Kaylee blinked. “That’s some impressive technology.”

“Intrusive as fuck, you mean. I need to have a little chat with Bonds, who is likely enjoying himself far, far too much.”

As if the humans weren't having their own conversation, Jolly continued. *“Everything you need, including a package of mini marshmallows and a bottle of Madagascar vanilla, is on the third shelf from the top on the right side.”*

The answer was so comprehensive that she needed a moment to respond. “Thank you.” Was she supposed to thank a computer? “That’s super impressive. How do I get a Jolly?”

“See, someone appreciates me.”

Frost shook his head. “You can have this one.”

“I’d rather be with somebody who appreciates me anyway.”

“I feel outnumbered.” Frost shook his head. “Since I’m going to be figuring out how to make cocoa—”

“You’ll need a saucepan, which you’ll find beneath—”

“Give it a rest.”

“And a whisk.”

“Jolly, standby mode.”

“Oh, I was enjoying her,” Kaylee protested.

“See?”

“Standby mode, Jolly. *Now.*”

His tone now held the impatience Kaylee was accustomed to hearing, and she turned her head to hide her mirth.

She crossed to the pantry and found the ingredients exactly where the chief of staff said they were located, and she

grabbed the bag of marshmallows, along with a big bottle of premium chocolate syrup.

When she lined everything up on the counter, she looked at Frost. “Do you mind if I make it?” His kitchen was a dream, and she wanted to use a high-end cooktop for the first time in her life.

“You’ll do a better job than I would.” He walked toward the long, gleaming wood bar. “We have some syrups.”

She glanced over. Just like at her favorite coffee shop, there were large bottles, with pump dispensers inside.

“Peppermint, raspberry, orange, butterscotch, almond, maple.”

“Has to be peppermint for the holidays.”

“Agree.” He nodded as he took a bottle from a shelf.

Kaylee found the pan in a cabinet next to the range, and a small whisk was among dozens of gadgets in a nearby drawer.

In minutes, the heavenly smelling sweet mixture was nearing a boil.

With the syrup on the marble island, he folded his arms and watched her, making her self-conscious.

“Do you enjoy cooking?”

“Baking, mostly, if I’m honest. Sugar is my favorite food group.” She stirred the milk. “I find it relaxing, but I don’t get to do it enough.”

“Work again?”

A defensive note laced his question, and she glanced at him. For once, she hadn’t mentioned her schedule to insult him. Perhaps because of their past, tension seemed to taint

their conversation. “Partly. But also all that family stuff, you know?”

Frost opened a cabinet and pulled out two good-size mugs that he placed on the counter near her. He crowded her space, filling her senses, sending her thoughts into a sexy spiral.

“You can come here and make as many cakes and cookies as you’d like.”

His comment surprised her. She’d never seen him grab a single pastry from the break room at work. “You don’t appear to be someone who indulges in many treats.” Or had the suggestion been meant in an offhand way? Or had it been broader, as an invitation to visit when she wanted?

As quickly as it had arisen, she shoved the thought aside. After the holidays, their personal arrangement—and charade—would end, and they’d have no need to spend time together. If what he said was true, he also wouldn’t be running Christoff much longer.

Why did those thoughts no longer appeal to her?

Bubbles popped on the surface of their cocoa, and she turned off the burner and removed the pan. “If you’ll excuse me? I need a little room to work.”

He stepped aside, and she sighed with relief.

This version of Frost was far more dangerous than the bosshole one she knew and didn’t like.

After she filled the cups, he pumped in the syrup.

With the scent of peppermint in the air, the kitchen smelled festive. “Marshmallows?”

“If you say.”

Again, his response surprised her.

She topped both beverages with the tiny, pillow-like puffs, then drizzled chocolate on top.

“Any ideas for exercise after this?”

His suggestive question made her hand shake. “A long walk?”

He angled his head to one side. “Not exactly where I was going.”

“I guessed that.” Kaylee barely recognized this bold version of herself. Generally she was only flirtatious at the Quarter, but he brought out a naughty side of her that she often kept hidden.

He picked up the mugs and offered one to her.

She took a sip of the peppermint-laced deliciousness and warmth went through her, spreading relaxation. “Wow.” Curious about his reaction, she waited for him to have his first drink.

“I’ll need to see my dentist after this.”

Kaylee winced. “That doesn’t sound good. Is it too much?”

“On the contrary.”

“You don’t hate it?”

“In fact, I could make this a nightly habit.”

Unsure whether he was joking or not, then deciding it didn’t matter either way, she grinned. “Enjoy.”

“Would you like a tour?”

“Yes.” Evidently her enthusiasm must have spilled over because he grinned.

The first floor also featured a bathroom and a workout space. No doubt that was how he was able to indulge in occasional sweets.

Then he showed her his study. “Nothing interesting.”

Maybe to him, but to her the room was revealing. At work, he’d inherited Sylvia’s former office, and he’d made no changes—his version of austerity measures, no doubt. But here, his personality was more present.

A Bonds computer sat in the middle of a large, masculine desk. The leather chair was massive and much older than she expected.

“It belonged to my grandfather,” he explained with a shrug. “Gran wanted me to have it.”

“Fills you with a sense of duty? Obligation?”

“Both. And it’s a form of continuity. I remember him sitting in it, smoking a cigar, making decisions.”

“The past connects us to the future.”

He studied her. “Insightful. And yes. It does indeed.”

A credenza had a couple of photos on top. One of them seemed recent, of him with an older lady. His grandmother, she guessed. A second showed a much younger, more carefree Frost along with a smiling woman, his arm slung over her shoulder. “Your mom?”

Shoulder propped against the doorjamb, he nodded. “Before the downfall.”

Small glimpses into what mattered to him.

On a shelf sat a statue of an owl—reminding her of the one she’d seen on his bag at the Quarter. “What’s the meaning of

that?”

“Of?”

She pointed. “Athena’s owl?”

“It symbolizes an organization I belong to.”

His vague answer sparked her curiosity. She didn’t know of any that had an owl as its logo. “What’s the name of it?”

“Something you likely haven’t heard of.”

“A college fraternity? Or something volunteer?”

“We do participate in charitable works around the world, yes.”

Which didn’t answer her question but told her plenty regardless.

“Let’s continue the tour.”

Which meant he was finished with the conversation.

Numerous questions swimming through her mind, she followed him to the top of the spiral staircase where he showed her a luxurious guest bathroom, two bedrooms, and then his suite.

From his king-size bed, he had stunning views on two sides. Once again, she was drawn to the vista.

Below them was a large pool deck and beyond that, a red streetcar. “I’d never want to leave this room.” The surroundings even included a sitting area with two wingback chairs angled toward each other.

“There’s more.”

“Oh?”

“This way.”

Next to the entrance to the spa-like bathroom was a door that she thought might lead to a closet.

He touched his fingertip to another sensor. With a quiet click, the door released, and he pushed it open. “After you.”

In the threshold, she froze at the sight of a fully equipped dungeon.

She gasped, almost sloshing her drink over its rim.

“You can check out the room if you’d like. Or not. The choice is yours.”

“I...” Outside of the Quarter, she’d never seen anything like this.

A spanking bench was covered in royal blue vinyl. Hooks hung from the ceiling. And a Saint Andrew’s cross occupied the center of the room. In addition to an oversize chair, small sink, and rolling carts, he also had cabinets and drawers. A duffel bag—the one she recognized from last night—sat on a counter. But it was the far wall that riveted her attention.

Every imaginable spanking implement was arranged by size and then color. “Oh...” She glanced over her shoulder at him.

One eyebrow was quirked as he waited for her response.

“I have no idea what to say.” Except this must have been what he meant by exercise.

“It’s available anytime should you wish to use it.”

How many other women had he entertained here? Not that the answer mattered to her.

“And I have one more surprise for you.”

It couldn’t be any more shocking than this.

When she stepped aside, he closed the door.

As she followed him back downstairs, her pulse slowly returned to its normal rhythm.

At the end of a long hallway was a frosted glass door, and she stopped in front of it. “Should I be nervous about what’s on the other side?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“There’s not a place in this condo that I don’t have nefarious plans for you.”

His admission made her clutch her cup against her chest.

“Have a look.”

Nerves on edge, she pushed through to a spectacular glass-enclosed sunroom. Marveling, she turned her head to take it all in—the views, several different places to relax, the hundreds of plants, and a waterfall that splashed into a pond filled with goldfish and koi. “This is impossible.”

“When you said you would have a difficult time leaving the bedroom, I think that’s because you didn’t know about this.”

Or the dungeon. “You’re right.”

“Jolly, temperature at seventy-two, please.”

“Oh now you want me?”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “Was I a terrible person in my last life?” Then he leveled a hard stare at Kaylee. “And no damn comments about the current one.”

Kaylee struggled to suppress a laugh. “If this is the kind of interaction you have with Jolly every day, I consider that

somewhere, somehow, justice is being served.” Maybe she’d send Julien Bonds a thank-you note.

Still, despite the chief of staff’s backtalk, warmth whispered from overhead vents. “This is why I suggested a warm beverage. In winter, it can be a little chilly. In summer, I can lower blinds to moderate the heat.”

By unspoken accord, she joined him near a set of four wicker chairs that were covered with thick, inviting yellow cushions. A small glass table was in front of the grouping which had been arranged to take advantage of the sight of a distant bridge.

She curled into one of the comfortable chairs, then covered herself with a blanket that was draped over the arm. “How do you ever leave to go to the office?” Much less spend so much time there?

“This is where I think, recharge. Work is for action. For righting wrongs.”

Studying this complex man, she drank some of her cocoa. The marshmallows had melted, and the drizzle coated the inside of the cup. Each mouthful was becoming sweeter and more potent.

“As the scandal unfolded, Mom had no one to turn to. Most of her social circle shunned her. For her, that was far worse than losing the house and other possessions. People she considered lifelong friends, including Greta’s parents? Gone. Her heartache was real. In the end, very few people attended her funeral.”

Kaylee winced. Her dad’s memorial service had been packed with people who shared stories of how he’d positively influenced their lives.

“I wanted to restore honor to my family and reestablish the resources my father squandered. It was built over generations, meant to help our descendants and others through a foundation.” He slammed his cup down. “No one had a right to gamble it away, one risky bet at a time.”

His problems were so different from hers that it was difficult to have any understanding. “It looks as if you righted the ship?”

“Not yet. But I’m on the way.”

She slid her mug next to his. “How did you do it?”

“I started my own management company, and I’m fortunate to be well connected.”

“Something to do with the owl on your duffel bag and in your study?”

“You are persistent.” His words seemed to land somewhere between a compliment and an irritation.

“It’s one of the traits that got me through school and is helping me climb the corporate ladder.” As well as continuing to push forward despite the financial hurdles in her way.

Frost pressed his palms together.

“I’ll look it up when I get home.”

“Of course you will.”

She leaned forward. “It’s a secret society, right?”

He laughed. “What do you know about those things?”

“I read articles and watch documentaries.” In fact, it was a guilty pleasure. She read everything she could about the Skull and Bones, the Yale society that three US presidents belonged to. People who belonged to those types of organizations went

on to become the world's power elite. From what she knew of her boss, he definitely belonged to that class.

“I see.”

“And honestly, everyone I've run across who is a member of a civic group is more than happy to talk about it, as if listing off their resume. Ergo...”

He waited.

“Whatever you're involved with has to be a secret society.”

“If the whole admin assistant gig doesn't work out for you, you could try becoming a detective.”

Beneath the blanket, she drummed her fingers on her thigh. “Which is the confirmation I was seeking. If I was wrong, you would have said so.” And it explained so much. His connection to Bonds. The reason he'd been able to recover his financial resources so quickly. He was talented, no doubt. But it went beyond that to friendships and kinship with others. “I'm confused as to why you're the CEO at Christoff if you have your own company.”

“A temporary position. Turnaround CEO, not one who leads in times of long-term growth.”

“Makes sense.” And also explained the other numerous management changes that had been made. All his own people, no doubt.

The next choice would be someone to focus on growth and sustainability.

Projects that Sylvia had been planning over the next three years had been accomplished in months, even weeks, under

Frost's tenure. And he'd done it all with fewer employees as well.

Her respect for him, no matter how grudging, built. But she told herself she didn't have to like him or his tactics to recognize their success. "You were starting to tell me why you told your grandmother we're married."

"My grandparents had a very solid relationship. Grandfather counted on Gran. She was his closest confidante, and he credited her with all his success. Despite what happened to my mom, Gran continues to believe in strong family ties. So she found a wife for me."

"She did...*what?*" That sounded positively medieval.

"It took me a few months to figure out what she was up to. But every party or event I was invited to, Milena was there. We were seated next to each other at meals, and Gran took pains to ensure we were often left alone. Since I was clueless, Milena told me she expected a proposal this year. Evidently Gran told her that's what I was planning."

"So instead of telling your grandmother that you weren't interested in marriage, you came up with a wife of your own."

"At the time, it seemed expedient."

"If not entirely honest."

"If I hadn't proposed to Milena, Gran would have found someone else. Since she wants to see me settled, she wouldn't have given up."

"Determination runs in your family."

"It does. And I know what kind of partner I ultimately want."

“Do you?” She leaned forward to pick up her cup and took a final drink.

“I learned my lesson with Greta. I won’t marry for convenience sake or allow anyone to find me a bride who is regarded as suitable.”

“Oh?”

“I’m looking for a woman who is smart. Beautiful. Cares about others. Someone I have things in common with.”

“Such as?”

“An interest in business.” He waited for a moment. “BDSM.”

Her insides tangled into a knot. Though kink had never been a big part of any of her relationships, she too wanted that. Not just for the stress relief but for a sense of interconnection, one like she’d shared with him after their scene.

Too nervous to pick up the thread of his conversation, she once again asked about his grandmother. “Do you think she’ll believe we’re married?”

“She will hope we are.” He shrugged. “And there’s no doubt she’ll like you a lot. And since I’ve been known to make quick decisions—some she considers rash—it won’t be an impossibility. I’ll simply say that I couldn’t wait to have you. We went to a justice of the peace after work—which is where we met. We’re keeping it quiet until after I am no longer the CEO because fraternization is frowned upon.”

He’d thought of everything.

“Of course she’ll press for a big reception sometime in the future. Just say we’re talking about it, and I’ll deal with the fallout at a later date.”

She nodded.

“Which leaves only one detail to discuss.” He lowered his voice, and the timber was rich and sensual, sending a shiver rippling up her spine.

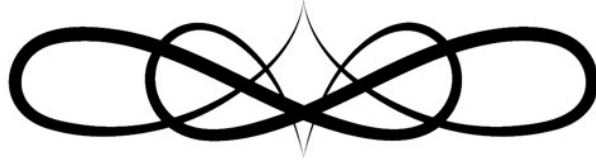
“Oh?”

After standing, he moved in closer. “Consummating our marriage.”

The cup almost slipped from her suddenly nerveless fingers, and he took it from her.

“Go to bed with me, Kaylee.” Invitingly he extended his hand toward her. “I want to make you mine.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Kaylee told herself she should shout, “No” and ask to be taken home. She shouldn’t consider his suggestion for even one second. Instead she remained where she was, looking up into his darkly enigmatic eyes, aching for a taste of the forbidden.

Since last night, she’d burned for him. Even the orgasm he’d given her at the club hadn’t been enough to keep her satisfied.

When he quirked an eyebrow in a seductive way, common sense fled. Slowly she slid her hand into his.

Frost helped her up then, with his hands on her shoulders, and continued to draw her toward him until they stood scant inches apart, breathing the same air.

“I’ve been obsessing about this.” Then he dropped his voice slightly, demandingly. “Open your mouth for me.”

Helpless to deny him, she did as he said, and he touched his tongue to hers.

He tasted of the sweet cocoa, laced with the undercurrent of peppermint. It was as potent as it was irresistible.

Earlier, his kiss had been tame, but now it was unrestrained, devouring her as he slid his tongue into her

mouth, teasing, thrusting.

In his arms, she surrendered, and he pressed a palm to the base of her spine, nudging her closer. His cock pressed against the softness of her belly, turning her insides into a river of need.

His kiss went on and on until her lips were swollen, and every womanly instinct urged her to yield to his masculine power.

Finally, leaving her gulping for air, he ended the kiss and dropped the hand he'd pressed to her back.

As she tried to orient herself, she squeezed her eyes shut.

“Are you okay?”

Am I? And a bigger question was, would she be all right when their fake romance came to an end? “You’re...ah... pretty good at that.” The kiss, for sure, but so much more than that. Coaxing her responses, making her feel safe, caring for her, the flowers, treating her like a princess. That alone stood in such sharp contrast to the way Dwayne had behaved. Even when she was dealing with her father’s death, he’d been demanding of her time. And he hadn’t bothered showing up for the funeral. She had no doubt Frost would always behave in a way that conformed to societal expectations.

“I could do that with you all day long.” His voice was husky with desire.

These moments that they were sharing, tiny glimpses of emotional intimacy, were wearing down her defenses, making him more human, ridiculously tempting.

She wasn’t sure she’d survive Frost’s determination.

“Shall we go upstairs?”

Could she manage to walk that far? The room already seemed to swim around her. “Yes.”

To give herself a moment to compose herself, and because it was ingrained, she paused to collect their empty cups.

He told her, “Leave them. The housekeepers will clean up.”

“It will only take a few minutes for me to wash the dishes and straighten the kitchen,” she protested.

“I said, leave them.” His voice allowed no argument. With that, he swept her off the ground and into his arms.

Gasping, desperate to regain her balance, she clung onto him. It was a mistake because his scent was heady with determination and raw masculinity.

“You need to do as you’re told.” His voice was uncompromising.

Despite the jostling movements as he walked, she tilted her head to look at him. Intuition flashed a warning not to tease him, but she was helpless to resist. “Or else what, Mr. Frost?”

“I’ll show you.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?”

“What would you like it to be?”

Dangerous, unexplored territory lay ahead. Dare she admit the truth to both of them?

When she didn’t answer, he made the decision for her. “It’s both. Consider yourself warned, my tempting sub.”

His use of a scene nickname sent her into a different headspace, making her response natural and swift. “If you say so, Sir.”

He climbed the stairs to his suite, then continued through to his dungeon.

From what he'd said in the sunroom, she expected him to take her to bed and make love to her. But that he wanted to play made her dizzy.

“Remove your shirt, sub,” he commanded, the husky, dominant tone from last night returning to his voice.

As she did so, the light glinted off her diamond. The sight startled her for a moment before she reminded herself its presence was all part of her new, temporary, make-believe life.

When she glanced up, he too was looking at the piece of jewelry.

Uncomfortably, she shifted, and he shook his head as he extended his hand to accept her sweater.

Today she'd worn a regular bra, although it was lacier than the ones she selected for work.

“And now the skirt.”

This was so much more personal than it had been at the club last night. There, most people were in some state of undress. Right now, it was just the two of them, in the silence, the sounds of their breaths filling the air. “Can we listen to some music?”

“So I can't hear your whimpers?”

She tipped her head back.

“Next time, perhaps.”

Last night he'd been overly accommodating, but now he was a full-on Dominant.

“The skirt,” he prompted a second time. “Unless you’d like to add more spanks to the ones I’m planning?”

Her pulse seemed to turn sluggish, and her fingers shook as she lowered the zipper, then allowed the material to swish to the floor.

After stepping out of the garment, she bent to retrieve it.

All the while, he continued to regard her.

Her mouth dried as she turned her skirt over to him.

“Gorgeous. Now the rest of your clothing.”

More nervous than she could believe possible, she removed her panties, then her bra.

“I’d like you to turn your back to me, then spread your legs and bend over.”

“Uhm, what about my shoes?”

“Leave them on. I like the look of your calves in them.”

This was the first time a man had asked her to do that. “I see.” Slowly, self-conscious, she followed his command, grabbing hold of her ankles, her hair brushing the hardwood floor.

“Last night, after I arrived home, I masturbated. And again this morning.”

Really?

He considered her. “Did you?”

Was he going to force her to admit that?

But the fact he allowed tension to grow proved he would wait as long as it took. “Yes.”

“What things were you thinking about?”

“The spanking.” How gorgeous he was, how sensational his chest and muscles were. “And the orgasm you gave me.”

“Are you hoping for another this evening?”

“Please.” She whispered the word.

“Do you deserve one?”

She was tempted to beg for one, but this was his dungeon. “That’s up to you, Sir.”

“Bravo. Such a perfect, submissive response.”

His growled speech made her crave more of his praise.

“What are you thinking about right now?”

“I’m trying not to have expectations.” Because they inevitably led to disappointment. “Just settling into the scene. Wanting to please you.”

“And why are we in here?”

“Because I asked what would happen if I didn’t behave.” From being upside down, blood was pounding in her head. “And I presume you intend to show me.”

“I do indeed.” He came up behind her and clapped his cupped palms on her bare buttocks.

The force made her gasp and move forward, releasing her ankles.

Frost instantly grabbed hold of her waist so she didn’t lose her balance.

When she was steady once more, he spoke again in a gruff, no-nonsense tone. “Back in position.”

The heat from the spank flooded her with hormones, and she needed a couple of seconds to comply with his order.

Kaylee had no doubt what he planned to do: arouse her but not completely satisfy her, keeping her on the precipice of pleasure. Anticipation coiled in her, causing her to curl her toes under.

Slowly he circled around her, then halted in front of her.

“Stand up for me.”

As soon as she did, she breathlessly met his gaze.

“Good girl.”

His approval rushed through her like a powerful wave.

“Next, I want you to pull your shoulders back and tuck your hands behind your neck.”

She complied, her hair cascading around her shoulders.

“Beautiful. And now, thrust your chest out a little farther.”

In this position, she was entirely vulnerable to him. Her breasts felt heavy and her nipples ached as if pleading for his attention.

Frost completed his slow circuit around her, his footsteps a touch menacing, reverberating on the hardwood floor, escalating her tension.

“You’re exquisite. At the club, you looked magnificent, but here with nothing between us, you’re breathtaking.” His words were etched with sincerity.

Never before had she experienced this sense of being cherished.

He stopped in front of her, his thumb sliding beneath her chin to gently tilt her face back. Every part of her body hummed with the memory of him—his fingers inside her, her

lips still slightly swollen from his earlier, fervent kiss, the taste of him lingering on her tongue.

“May I?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Say it aloud.”

“Yes, Sir.” Then she added the next word in a whisper. “Please.”

As he released her chin, her gaze settled on his hands. The world narrowed to this moment, and she was transfixed on his movements as he held her, cupping her full breasts in his palms. The fit was perfect, as if meant to be.

“I’d like to explore exactly how sensitive your nipples are.”

At his soft words, goose bumps chased up her arms.

“Do you like to have them sucked? Teased?”

The suggestion arced desire through her. Right now, she wondered if she’d die if he moved on without satisfying her. “The first moment is the most overwhelming.”

“But then you can tolerate a little more once you get desensitized?”

This determined billionaire totally devastated her senses. “It’s possible.”

“Do you trust me enough to explore this together?”

Odd. On Friday, at work, she would not have believed this moment, his question, was even possible. “I...” In his beautiful blue eyes, she was lost. “Yes.”

“You have your safe word and your slow word. Promise me you won’t be afraid to use them. Right now, this is about

me learning what makes you happy. It's not about what I want, though I assure you that every time I touch you, I feel pleasure."

Unable to help herself, she let her gaze wander below his waist. His erection strained against his dress slacks, and a surge of feminine power shot through her, making her pulse race with the knowledge that she held such control over the formidable Dominant.

As the sunlight poured through the window, casting a warm glow over the room, he gently brushed his thumbs across her sensitive tips. Her breath hitched, and she curled her hands around his wrists, her fingers digging into his skin.

"Too much?" He paused, looking into her eyes with a hint of concern. "If it's too much, use your safe word."

"I just..." she began, then blew out a shaky breath. "No. I'm green, Sir."

"Good. In that case, back into position."

Slowly she obeyed.

Now that he'd gathered her consent, he continued, squeezing harder and lowering his head. His tongue laved one with a gentle insistence, and then he sucked it into his mouth. The sensation sent a pulse of pleasure through her, drawing her deeper into the whirlpool of desire he was creating.

She was gone, unable to comprehend anything but desire and response.

Long, long moments later, she became aware of the sound of his voice inviting her back to reality, some place she wasn't sure she wanted to be.

"Kaylee?"

Blinking, she returned to him. “Sir?”

“I was saying your legs look very sexy in those heels,” he murmured, pulling back, a triumphant smile playing on his lips. “Walk over to the spanking bench, my tempting submissive.”

Kaylee looked over at the piece of furniture. The top was flat, and there were two planks on each side where her knees would fit. “I’ve never actually used one before.” And she wasn’t sure exactly how to climb onto it.

“Then your movements may be awkward at first. But I promise, I’ll enjoy that tremendously.”

Beast.

In the end, he offered his assistance, helping her up. Then she lay face down, breasts flattened on the vinyl surface, her arms dangling at her sides. He adjusted the railings so that her knees were comfortable.

“Would you like me to secure your wrists to keep you in position?”

Sometimes she knew that was a blessing. Because if she attempted to escape him, he may spank her longer or harder. “Not unless that pleases you, Sir.”

“This time, we can skip it.”

This time? Which meant he planned to scene again in the future?

“Relax.”

Since every muscle was clenched, that was difficult.

Rather than repeat himself, he simply began to trail his fingertips over her body, then spanked her a couple of times

before rubbing her skin to bring blood flow to the area.

“Would you like to be a little more adventurous this afternoon?” he asked, selecting a tawse from the wall.

She looked at the tool, fear and excitement warring inside her.

As she watched, he swung it through the air a couple of times, making her gasp.

“Are you brave enough?”

Am I? Curiosity trumped nervousness, and she gave him a whispered, “Yes.”

“How many?”

Fighting off the butterflies in her tummy, she wiggled around. “How ever many you say.” Even though a good submissive would leave that answer there, she corrected her response. “No more than five?”

He chuckled, the sound diabolical. “Six.”

She should have kept her mouth shut.

Before she was completely ready, the first spank seared her with its twin leather kisses. She exhaled a shocked breath.

Frost massaged away the pain, and she turned her head to the side, trying to settle in.

The second didn't startle her as much, but his third made her clench her hands.

“Let go.”

Appreciating the reminder, she relaxed. “Yes, Sir.”

Gently she closed her eyes and splayed her fingers against the blue vinyl.

“That’s it.”

Knowing what to expect allowed her to accept the next with a sigh. Now that she was accustomed to it, she loved the sting, the way the strips of leather separated on impact.

“And this,” he said, rubbing her again when he was finished, “is a taste of what happens when you don’t do as you’re told.”

“Yes, Sir.”

On and on he went, driving her to distraction with the tiny bites of pleasure.

“Did you learn your lesson, my sub?” he asked when he was finished.

“What lesson were you hoping I’d learn, Sir? To behave?” She turned her head to the side to look at him, but her hair hung in such disarray that she couldn’t focus on him. “Or to misbehave?”

He chuckled as he traced his marks. “I didn’t know you had a touch of brat in you.”

She hadn’t either. But now that she’d started to play with him, she didn’t want to stop.

He helped her from the bench, holding onto her until she was steady on her feet. “Next time, if you want, we can increase the intensity.”

For now, it had been perfect.

“Lead the way into the bedroom. I want to see your hips swing, and I want to admire my handiwork on your ass.”

Once they were in his suite, she helped to undress him, unbuttoning his shirt, then removing owl-shaped cuff links that

winked in the overhead light. Once he took off his shoes and socks, she opened his belt and lowered his zipper.

When he stepped out of his trousers, she drank in the sight of his entire, spectacular body. Every muscle and sinew could have been carved from iron.

Her breath caught. He was...magnificent—restrained strength and intention.

Then, cock jutting impressively, he strode to the bathroom and returned with a small, square packet. “Put this on me.”

She nodded.

“First, you’ll kneel for me.”

Hyperaware his actions and words meant they were still in a scene, she did as he said, then looked up at him. “May I...”

“Yes.”

Tenderly she cupped his testicles. Then she took his cock in hand, circling it, gently squeezing before bringing her mouth forward to capture a salty droplet of precum.

“Kaylee...” He wrapped her name in sensuality as he groaned.

In this moment, she had the power, and it was intoxicating.

Then she angled her head to suck the tip of him into her mouth, licking, tasting, while simultaneously stroking him.

“*Fuck.*” He buried his hand in her hair.

Taking that as permission as well as approval, she increased her strokes until his breaths were ragged and only he filled her senses.

She wanted the exquisite satisfaction of having him in her mouth.

But he leaned down to capture her chin. “Enough.”

The darkness in his eyes warned her not to argue with him.

This time, he offered the packet to her. After tearing it open with shaky fingers, she somehow managed to roll the condom down his length.

Once she stood, he folded his arms, overwhelming her.

“Bend over the bed.”

“But why? I was behaving,” she protested as she frowned.

“I like spanking you. And keeping you on edge.”

Would she always be this nervous around him? Or was this because he was naked, and she knew they’d be having sex?

This time he didn’t help her to get situated. Instead he waited, watching.

For long, silent moments nothing happened, and her tension grew.

Then finally he swatted her rear, delivering repeated, sensually sharp strokes that left her whimpering and gasping on the edge of completion.

His skills as a lover were amazing. He seemed to know her needs as much as she did.

“This is a good place to start.”

She turned her head to the side, hoping to see him, but he was out of view.

“Spread your legs.”

With her heart racing, she did as he instructed.

“Now open your mouth.”

Following his command, she sucked on the two fingers he offered, wetting them.

Then he slid his hand between her legs to play with her pussy, teasing her clit, spanking her already-sore rear, ensuring she was on her tiptoes, crying out, begging for his possession.

Only when she was totally ready for him, going mad, did he place his cockhead at her entrance.

“Sir!”

He growled. “I fucking love the way that sounds on your lips.”

She was hungry for him, and she thrust her hips back, silently asking for more.

Slowly he began to bury himself.

A taste wasn't enough, and she frantically pushed herself back, gyrating, attempting to take all of him.

Her relentless Dominant pressed his hand between her shoulder blades, holding her prisoner. “Be still.”

“But—”

“We're doing this at my pace.”

In abject frustration, she clenched the duvet.

“Surrender will be rewarded, tempting sub. Annoyance will be vanquished.”

This was the same man she worked for, only right now he was more frustrating than he was at the office. Not even for a moment did she doubt him.

Finally he seated himself balls deep within her.

“That’s...” She gasped. “You’re...” He was enormous, and she gulped for air while she swayed a little, trying to accommodate him. “I’m so full, Sir.”

“The fit is perfect.”

By slow measures, he eased out, then slid back in. But he was a generous lover, continuing to play with her pussy, and alternating that with spanks that brought her to a fevered pitch.

Her pussy began to clench around him, and the frustrating man pulled all the way out.

She buried her cry in the bedding.

“I want to watch you come. On your back, Kaylee.”

He lifted her onto the bed, and she parted her thighs in welcome.

With a groan, he took her, pinning her arms above her head as she lifted her hips to him.

“You’re mine. Have no doubt.”

As an orgasm began to unfurl deep inside, she could deny him nothing.

He claimed her mouth, devouring her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, offering the surrender he’d demanded.

Then he pumped his hips harder, and she began to spiral.

Finally he pulled his lips back from hers, then released his grip on her wrists to raise himself up. “Open your eyes.”

Kaylee shook her head. How could she? She was so lost; he might as well have asked for the moon.

“Look at me.” Though his voice was soft, his tone was implacable as he pushed himself farther away from her body.

Finally she did, meeting the icy blue depths of his eyes. Appreciation was written in his gaze, and something fiercer that she didn't dare name.

As he fucked her hard, the way she desperately wanted, a sob caught in her throat.

She'd never experienced anything like this: raw carnal sensuality swirling with an emotional connection.

"That's it."

"I'm..." Everything inside her seemed to freeze as her climax demanded release.

"Give it to me."

Crying out his name, she splintered, giving him everything she had to offer.

For long moments, as he trailed a fingertip over her cheekbone, satisfaction continued to wash through her.

With an exhausted sigh, all tension drained from her.

"You were everything I hoped." He kissed her forehead.

Once she met his gaze, he began to move inside her again, starting slow and rebuilding the intensity.

This time, she watched him, marveling at the way his jaw tightened. His biceps bulged, and his breath was measured as if he were delaying the inevitable.

She reached for him, digging her hands into his hair.

The color of his eyes reminded her of a storm-tossed sea. As much as he'd wanted her orgasm, she now wanted his.

With a guttural, "Fuck," he climaxed, pulsing inside her.

For the first time ever, sex completed her.

After staring at her deeply, he rolled to one side and left her for just long enough to remove the condom. Then he returned to tuck her against his strong body, wrapping his arms around her.

Neither spoke. Even if she knew what to say, she doubted she'd let the words out for fear of spoiling the moment. Instead she wanted to bask in whatever magic they'd created.

Eventually their breaths evened, but she didn't want to let reality intrude.

“I love being inside you.”

And she loved having him there, no matter how bad of an idea that was.

Shadows lengthened in the room, letting her know that afternoon was giving way to evening.

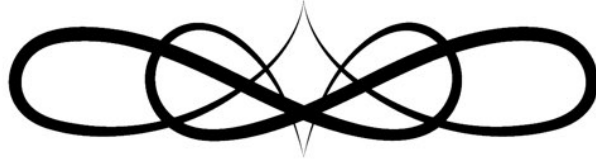
But still, he held her.

Then, moments later, he brushed her hair back from her face. “I'm not finished with you yet.”

“Oh?”

“Not even close.” His eyes glinted, and a guttural, possessive note rang in his voice as he said, “You're mine. And I'm going to prove it.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



Desire, as hot as it was demanding, pulsed through Kaylee.
Prove it.

A wolfish grin becoming a snarl, he grabbed another condom and took her in a single stroke, making her gasp.

“I want your legs over my shoulders.”

He helped her into the position he wanted, and when he sank in, he was deeper than before, splitting her open. “Oh God.”

This time, there was no lovemaking. It was hardcore fucking, possessive. His hard thrusts matched his untamed, relentless personality.

And she was helpless to deny him.

In this moment, she wanted this every bit as much as he did.

On and on it went, until she was crying out. Desperate for what, she didn't know.

“Say it.”

She knew what he wanted but couldn't admit it out loud.

Impossibly he drove in with even more force.

This shouldn't be something she loved, but she did. This wildness satisfied a part of her that had never been reached before.

“Fucking say it, Kaylee. Unless you want me to light up your ass.”

Maybe she wanted exactly that.

Reaching between them, he played with her clit, pressing his thumb against it, plunging her into a dizzying spiral of desire.

“Give me the words.”

She had to have the orgasm that loomed out of reach, the one he'd deny her unless she yielded to his command.

Driving into her, pressing against her, he captured her mouth.

Unable to resist him, she grabbed hold of his shoulders, digging her fingertips into his unyielding flesh.

She was coming apart. Finally she wrenched her mouth from his. “*Yours.*” Right then, in that moment, she meant it.

“Goddamn right.”

Instead of driving to completion, he stunned her by drawing back from her. Before she could figure out his intent, he lowered his head to her pussy, then devoured her with his mouth, licking her, eating her out as he fucked her with three fingers, stretching her impossibly wide. While she writhed and whimpered, he eased out one of his slick fingers and instead worked it into her ass, claiming every part of her. It was delicious. She needed more, everywhere.

Then frustrating her, he left her completely, and she moaned her protest.

“I’ve got you.”

He rolled to his side and reached toward the nightstand. She couldn’t see what he was doing, but a moment later, he pressed something cool and slick against her anal whorl.

She went rigid.

“You’re going to take this for me. Bear down.” Firmly, one hand on her belly, he began to insert the plug.

The fit was impossible. Blinking frantically, she looked at him. “I can’t!”

“You already did.”

The teardrop shape settled into place, and she exhaled.

Then, intent etched in his gaze, he slid his large cock inside her needy pussy.

Between his possession and the plug, she was fuller than she ever remembered being. Breathing became almost impossible.

Then he thrust forward in a single, impaling motion, making her thrash and cry out as a climax built and built, splintering her thoughts.

Once she was drenched in sweat, calling his name, lifting her hips as she simultaneously begged for mercy and for more, he stopped what he was doing and flipped her onto her stomach.

“Offer yourself to me.”

Her body shaking, she spread her thighs.

“Lift your hips.” He helped, then stuffed a pillow beneath her. “You have nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.”

As if he owned her, he claimed her from behind.

The orgasm plowed into her with unexpected force, devastating her from the inside out, plunging her into a pulsing abyss deep inside her own head where reality no longer existed.

On some level, she was aware of him taking his own release. Once he had, she was more replete than she'd ever been.

He satisfied her in a way no one else did.

She grumbled when he turned her over and pressed a warm towel between her thighs. As he began to remove the plug, she whimpered.

“Shh.”

As he continued to care for her, she relaxed. For once, she didn't have the energy to argue with him.

When he pulled her against his body, she snuggled in his arms and dozed.

Kaylee had no idea how long she slept, but she awakened to the sound of rushing water and the room in near darkness.

With a yawn, she pushed up onto her elbows, and a blanket fell to her waist. When had he covered her?

In his glorious nakedness, cock semihard, he crossed to the bed and sat next to her.

Frantically, nipples pebbling as she recalled what they'd just done—the intensity of it all—she pulled the blanket back into position.

“You okay?”

Now that she'd had a taste of that kind of sex, she wanted more. She searched for embarrassment and found none. So she

responded honestly. “Never better.”

“Good. Because I can’t get enough of you.”

Terrifying her, she felt the same way.

He smoothed a strand of hair behind her ear. “I wanted to fuck you all night, but I promised I’d get you home at a reasonable hour.” His voice was every bit as husky as it had been during sex. “I guarantee you; I’d rather not keep my word.”

Part of her didn’t want him to either. It would have been so easy to sleep in the security of his arms.

“Figured you might like a bath before I take you home.”

She appreciated his thoughtfulness.

After standing, he offered his hand.

Tamping down her instinctive self-consciousness, she accepted his help. Then she was in front of him, inches separating them, the scent of unrestrained desire lingering in the air.

Impossibly she wanted him again.

If he pulled her closer, she wouldn’t resist. And that made him more than dangerous.

After the space of a few heartbeats, he released her, sending a ridiculous shiver of disappointment through her.

Kaylee followed him into the ensuite, where steam billowed from the soaking tub.

“Smells good.” As he turned off the water, she inhaled deeply. “Is that lavender?”

“No idea. Grabbed a package of Epsom salts.” As if confounded, he shrugged. “Don’t care about the scent. I just

want to ensure your body isn't too sore." He swept his gaze over her, allowing it to linger on her breasts. "For very selfish reasons."

She swallowed deeply. That he too was thinking of being together again thrilled her.

"Your towel is on this heated rack." He pointed.

"You've thought of everything."

While she eased into the massive tub, he entered the walk-in shower with its glass surround.

She sank down to her chin, letting her eyelids sleepily drift shut and allowing the water to soothe her. Her body was aching more than she'd realized. But the warmth and bath salts relaxed her completely.

A few moments later, she looked at him, watching him lather, his impressive muscles rippling beneath the cascading water. Then he stroked his enormous erection.

At that moment, he caught her looking at him. He paused, hand curved around his dick, and hormones flooded her. This man—Dominant—seemed to own her responses.

"See something you like?" His grin was quick, quirky.

"As a matter of fact..." Maybe because her defenses had been lowered by what they'd shared, she answered honestly. "Yes. I do."

He turned off the faucet, then stared at her. "Likewise."

Like a voyeur, she watched him rinse, then shake water from his skin, then grab a towel as he stepped out of the shower unit.

As he dried off—the size of his cock not diminishing at all—he glanced at her. “How’s the bath?”

“It’s perfect. An excellent suggestion.” And how she’d like to have a tub like this instead of one that was contractor grade.

After she finally drained the water, he dried her off. “I want to look at your skin to see if you have any bruises.”

When she returned home after their scene at the Quarter, she’d examined her skin as best as she could and couldn’t find a single mark. Secretly she’d hoped, even expected, that the raised lettering on the paddle would have left some sort of imprint.

“Please lean forward and put your forearms on the vanity.”

“Sir?” In confusion, she furrowed her eyebrows.

“For my inspection.”

Feeling a little vulnerable, she waited. Frost scraped his thumbnail across several parts of her buttocks.

“A few traces of red but nothing bad.” He opened a nearby drawer and pulled out a tube of arnica. “But I will take good care of you regardless.”

She remained where she was while he applied the cream, but then he extended his exploration, stroking between her legs. “Sir!”

“You’re wet.”

Each time he touched her, she became so, so aroused.

For minutes, much longer than it should have taken, he smoothed on the cream, massaging it deeply into her buttocks. She turned herself over to him, savoring the moment.

“That’ll do.”

Then, leaving her unfulfilled, he told her she could stand back up. *Frustrating Dominant.*

Rattled by the arousal gnawing at her, she followed him back into the bedroom and dressed in her clothes he'd draped over the back of a chair.

This time, he opted for trousers and a black, long-sleeved shirt. The color made his eyes even more startling, and the form-fitting fabric showed the outline of his muscles, reminding her of his power.

Finally ready, she followed him back downstairs where he retrieved the leftovers from the fridge and helped her into her jacket.

Though she knew going home was the best thing, she hated to leave.

“Hello, Jolly,” he said to the chief of staff.

“Decided you finally need something, Frosty?”

At the computer's outrageous attitude, Kaylee shook her head.

“I'll be driving the car. Have it waiting.”

A thick silence draped the atmosphere, almost as if the computer were sulking.

Kaylee shrugged. “I think Jolly wants you to tell her thank you.”

His mouth opened and closed comically as if the mere suggestion was absurd. After a deep sigh, he shook his head. “No chance.”

Pointedly she glanced from the speakers then back at Frost.

“I’m fucking calling Bonds tomorrow.”

“But we need the car today, right?” Seeing him so confounded was pure joy.

“*Jesus.*” Closing his eyes, he relented. “Thank you... Jolly.”

“*My pleasure, dreamboat. Anything for you.*”

They rode the elevator to the garage where a sleek silver Bonds sedan was awaiting their arrival.

“Impressive technology.” Her boss lived life in a way she couldn’t conceive of or ever afford.

He assisted her into the sumptuous compartment. The leather seats hugged her body as if custom-made for her, then automatically adjusted to provide comfort and support to her lumbar area.

“Tell Jolly what temperature you’d like your seat set to.”

“If she’ll pay attention.”

“Try it.” He shrugged. “She likes you.”

“Jolly, will you please set my seat to seventy-four degrees?”

“*Let me know if there’s anything else I can do to make you comfortable, Ms. Robbins.*”

Instantly warmth surrounded her. “Thank you.” She glanced at Frost as he pulled out of the parking garage and onto the quiet street. “This is deluxe.” On really cold days—or hot summer ones for that matter—her cantankerous car didn’t even want to start.

“Jolly, will you play jazz Christmas music?” he asked.

A tune she recognized filled the vehicle's interior, relaxing her, making her feel a little more festive.

When they arrived at her apartment complex, she was so content that it was difficult to unfasten her safety belt to reach for the door handle. "I had a..." She hesitated. Where were the words to describe the whirlwind day, from purchasing an extravagant engagement ring, to a fun lunch, conversation in the sunroom, amazing sex, dominating possession, then his tenderness?

Aware of him watching her, she started again. "I'll see you at work, Mr. Frost."

His eyes narrowed. "You will indeed."

She escaped from the car only to have him arrive at the front of the hood before she did.

"I'll walk you in."

Once again, his words were a statement, not a question.

Inside, he slid the leftovers in the fridge while she placed her purse on a table.

Silently he studied her, sending her pulse into overdrive.

"Bend over the back of the couch."

Softly Kaylee blew out a breath. She was trying to detach from him, even a little, but he made that impossible.

When he cleared his throat, she couldn't deny him.

Once she'd done as he said, he deftly flipped the hem of her skirt up to her waist and slid a finger between her legs. She was damp, ready for his Dominance.

"Whatever you're thinking, I won't let you deny what we have." Harshly he kneaded his fingers into the flesh of her

buttocks, squeezing even harder before stepping back to right her clothing.

While she struggled to breathe, he leaned over her, pressing her body down. Then he kissed the side of her neck. “Damn right, I’ll see you in the morning, Kaylee.”

Flabbergasted, she didn’t respond.

“Lock up after me.”

With that, the door bounced against its casing.

Since Evan Frost had blazed onto the scene, he’d completely shaken her world. He’d cracked the protective shell around her heart, leaving her vulnerable not just to him, but for him.

Standing to wrap her arms protectively around herself, she wondered how she’d survive the emotional upheaval he’d brought into her life.

Mere moments later, her cell phone chimed. Crossing the room slowly, she opened her purse to grab the device.

Don’t masturbate.

Holding her breath, she waited, expecting more. But no other messages arrived. The behavior was typical Frost—ensuring she would think of him, and only him, for the rest of the night. Agreeing to be his pretend wife was the most reckless decision she’d ever made.

And if she wanted to save herself, she needed to take an immediate, emotional step back.

As if that was possible.

Sometime between surrendering at the club and playing with him at his house, she’d fallen for him. The damnable,

relentless Dominant had chipped away at her resistance.

And now, her rear still tender, worn out from their time together, she went to bed and immediately drifted off to sleep.

A short time later, a dizzying nightmare awakened her. She'd been falling through a long, dark void, screaming for help. Hundreds of people watched her plunge past while she frantically reached out her hand for help.

Drenched in sweat, heart pounding, she got up long enough to change into a pair of shorts and a tank top.

Even after she climbed beneath the blankets again, she tossed and turned, unable to vanquish the horrific images from her mind.

Sometime after midnight, in total frustration, she gave up the struggle, threw back the covers, and headed for the living room to watch television. With a sigh, she flipped from show to show, but nothing held her interest, and her mind drifted to Frost.

She hit the MUTE button, and once the distraction was gone, he consumed her thoughts. Memories rushed back: their wild sex, the lovemaking, their time at the club. Then, unbidden, an image of the owl on his duffel and on his cuff links returned.

Who was Evan Frost, really?

Giving in to her curiosity, she walked across the room to grab her laptop computer. Once she was back on the couch, she began a search.

Secret society, owl symbol returned only a few results, but there was a magazine exposé that captured her interest.

Intrigued, she opened it and asked for the words to be summarized.

People who were quoted in the article refused to be named, which meant any information could be conjecture or even false.

But according to what the journalist discovered, an organization, known as the Zeta Society, had been formed in the 1800s. They supposedly held annual meetings—known as the Oak Valley Gathering—on a Louisiana estate. In the comments below, readers added their insights, naming people who were suspected to be Titans. Rafe Sterling. The President of the United States. A Texas senator. The richest, most controversial man on the planet.

Going back in history, she found an article written almost a hundred years ago by a reporter who happened to see some of the country's most influential men—from playwrights to scientists and doctors and politicians—at a New Orleans hotel. In his newspaper column, he'd referred to the men as Titans. Interestingly several of the gentlemen carried bags with an owl logo on the side.

Much like Frost's?

She slammed the computer lid down and placed the machine on a cushion. Then she stood to pace the floor. Considering everything she'd just learned—as well as the guesses that he hadn't denied—Kaylee had no doubt the Zeta Society existed and that he was a member.

The information unsettled her even further.

What kind of world was unfolding in her own life?

Still, she wanted to know more, even if it drew her deeper into a vortex.

With a sigh, she paced to her laptop, snatched it up, then carried it to the counter and began a new search on Frost himself.

More than a hundred results popped up, including his business wins and losses, along with details of the scandal.

The man garnered as much press as a celebrity.

Stretching, she lifted her hair from the back of her neck. Really, that's what he was. A billionaire Titan.

The knowledge rocked her world.

After recovering from the shock, she dug a little deeper and discovered his grandmother's name—Ophelia Delaney.

A search on her name brought up an article in an architectural magazine, featuring pictures of her Garden District home, along with photos of a fundraiser she'd hosted there.

Even though most images didn't have names of the attendees listed beneath them, she recognized several people. Master Mason and Master Trevor from the Quarter, a former LSU football legend, a movie star who owned a place in the French Quarter, and a woman who might have been Mistress Aviana, but in street clothes and without stage makeup and a theatrical wig, she was impossible to identify.

Kaylee shook her head. What the hell was she thinking, trying to be part of his world? Even for a few hours, there was no way she could fool his grandmother into believing Frost would marry someone like her.

Her thoughts now in even greater turmoil, she once again closed the computer and decided to make herself a cup of hot chocolate, but even that reminded her of being in the kitchen

in Frost's home, standing next to him. And then, what had happened next, in his dungeon...

Damn it. Why couldn't she get him out of her head?

The sweet-smelling mixture began to boil, and she quickly turned off the burner. As she grabbed a mug, the diamond in her ring glittered.

Its presence represented their fake union, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, leading to the swirling mess of confusion and her hormonal reaction to Frost.

With determination, she removed the ring and carried it to her bedroom where she placed it in its protective box. Not satisfied, she shoved it into a drawer beneath a pile of T-shirts.

Praying the act helped her find the internal peace she sought, she returned to the kitchen to sip her warm beverage.

But it didn't help.

Filled with restless energy, she did a couple of chores and jotted herself a note to text Maddie during actual daylight hours, apologizing for not calling and promising to be in touch soon. Then, out of things to do, she returned to the bedroom.

The rest of the night was filled with more unsettling dreams, a confounding mix of sex, erotic spankings, and soul-crushing loss.

Monday, when her alarm dragged her back to consciousness, she was exhausted.

And Frost was the source of her problems.

Wrapping a robe around her, she headed to the kitchen for coffee. As she waited for the life-giving substance to flow into the pot, she rested her hips against the counter.

The truth she hadn't wanted to face last night was now in front of her, stark and real. The time with Frost—being spoiled by him, shared jokes, and her carnal response to his demands—created an intimacy that enticed her to lower her guard. And a wayward, feminine part of her longed for a relationship, so much so that she'd started to allow herself to believe the fantasy with Frost was real.

How ridiculous is that?

To keep her sanity, to save herself, Kaylee realized she had to stay away from him. But how in the hell was she supposed to endure the next thirty-six hours?

CHAPTER NINE



What in the actual fuck?

Anxious to see Kaylee this morning, Frost had gotten up early, worked out, taken a cold shower to keep his libido in check, then headed to the office early.

As expected, she'd shown up right on time, clutching an oversize to-go cup of coffee and bearing no resemblance to the woman he'd spent the weekend with. At the club, her reactions to him had been stunningly sexy, and their time together at his house sizzled. As a woman—and as a sub—Kaylee was sassy, responsive, and gave more than he could have ever anticipated.

Dressed in slacks and flats with an Oxford shirt buttoned all the way to her throat, Kaylee was as remote as the first day he'd walked through Christoff's door.

No matter what conversational tack he'd tried for the first hours of the day, she'd responded professionally but without warmth, as if she'd retreated into some sort of shell.

Then it hit him. His ring was no longer on her finger.

Frustration gnawed at him, escalating into a pounding headache.

Right before lunchtime, she knocked on the doorframe and entered his office, carrying a pile of checks.

“The accounting department would like your signature on these before you leave for the holiday.”

“Have a seat, Ms. Robbins. We have something to discuss.”

“Oh?”

Last night, she might have added *Sir*. But today, it was as if they’d never spent a private moment together, and he wouldn’t fucking put up with it.

After he’d taken her home, he’d been filled with restless energy. Instead of retreating to his house, he’d come to the office to work out at the state-of-the-art fitness center. At times, he liked the different assortment of equipment, and it provided a change of view.

Even a brutal amount of punishment and jacking off in the shower didn’t banish thoughts of her, and he’d slept like shit.

Slowly she perched on the edge of a chair.

Today she’d pinned up her hair, but a tiny tendril had escaped to curl against her cheekbone.

How damn much he wanted to tuck it back into place. Or better, pull all the pins out of her updo and have her hair fall in wild abandon around her shoulders like it had when they made love last night.

That’s what it had been.

Making love.

Unusual for him.

He loved sex—every part of it. But until her, he'd never joined with a woman from a place of such tenderness.

Now she'd cloaked herself in a shell, and he intended to demolish it.

Deliberately he signed each check, taking his time to read who it was to and the precise amount.

She sighed in frustration.

Generally she left them with him and returned sometime later.

“You wanted to talk?”

“Where's your ring?” Its absence had been gnawing at him all day.

“In a box on my dresser.”

The answer was so quick, she must have prepared in advance.

“Wearing it would have invited questions that I am not prepared to answer. I don't think everyone at the company needs to know about this...” She stopped. Then, after crossing her legs at the ankles—so damn prim and proper—she continued, “Our arrangement. And I'm not making up another fake boyfriend.”

“I see.” Hard to argue with. Even if he didn't like her response.

“Anything else? Otherwise I need to get back to work.”

Was she intentionally yanking his chain? “I'm considering closing the business for the rest of the year.”

Though she opened her mouth, she said nothing.

“Speechless?”

“I’m trying to figure out what you mean. Is this a cost-saving measure? As in you’re forcing your employees to take time off without pay?”

Always so damn suspicious of him. “No.”

She blinked slowly. “In that case...I don’t understand.”

“Over the last few months, everyone has worked hard. As you are so fond of reminding me.”

“True.” She inclined her head. “But it’s also the end of the fiscal year. There’s a lot of work to be done and with fewer employees than normal already.”

“So you’re advising against it?”

Frantically she shook her head. “No.”

“Then...?”

Meeting his gaze, she exhaled. “Are you actually serious about this?”

Was the idea so novel that it appeared to be ludicrous? “I thought it would please you.”

“It does, but...” Suspiciously she narrowed her gaze. “You don’t do anything that’s not self-serving.”

Frost winced. After what he’d told her about his determination to restore the family fortune and good name, the remark took him aback. “I assure you; this idea was anything but.”

“So you’d allow everyone to go home tonight and not expect them back until after the new year?”

“Correct.”

“What about the fiscal losses?”

“More than made up for in company morale and employees who return reengaged. Or so I’d assume that would be your argument?”

“And still...”

“You—and the rest of the company—see me as an ogre. But have you, even once, talked to the people who’ve left?” He’d fucking had enough of her judgment. “Do you have any idea as to the size of their severance packages?”

Her lips parted. In other circumstances, he might have found that charming. But her shock didn’t soothe his savage beast.

“Or our outplacement services? We’ve helped employees find new employment opportunities.”

“You...?”

“I’m not fucking with your head for my own amusement, Ms. Robbins.”

“I didn’t mean to imply—”

“You most certainly did.” He wanted to drag her to her feet, yank her against him, and kiss her senseless until she begged for his touch. “Turning around a company takes a lot of damn work... But if you are against the idea of us closing for a week, we’ll simply move on. Work until five on Christmas Eve and take off Christmas Day. See everyone before eight a.m. on Thursday morning.”

“No.” Frantically she shook her head. “I think your plan is more than generous.”

“Do you?” And the fact he hadn’t just handed out pink slips and said “fuck it” to the people he’d laid off? “Handle the details.” He shoved the checks across the desk to her.

“I...” She leaned forward to snatch them up, then stood and pivoted, striding toward the exit.

Then, at the doorway, she stopped and looked back. “Thank you, on behalf of all employees who will enjoy time with their loved ones.”

Frost offered a curt nod.

With his palms pressed together, he watched her go.

Where the hell had the ridiculous idea to shut down come from? The board would say he’d lost his mind. Of course they’d do it from their holidays on their yachts and private islands.

In the adjoining room, her fingers clacked against a keyboard. And he couldn’t deny the truth. He’d made the decision because he was besotted enough to want to make her happy.

But since he was already making ridiculous financial decisions, he called the office manager of his own business and told her that he was closing that business as well.

Her reaction was similar to Kaylee’s.

Maybe part of him really was a scrooge—much as he hated that realization.

Less than five minutes later, an email notification from Kaylee slid across the bottom of his computer screen.

He tapped the icon to open it.

Changes required?

She’d drafted a holiday greeting from him to all company employees. The note expressed sincere appreciation for everyone’s extraordinary efforts over the preceding few

months. She concluded with an optimistic outlook for the upcoming year and wished everyone a merry Christmas.

No doubt the sentiment was warmer than anything he'd have penned, but it was close enough to his style to be believable—even if it was a bit of a stretch.

Before he could type his response, she reappeared in his office.

“The email is fine,” he told her.

She nodded. “I called the head of HR. She suggests we contact the VPs and have them notify their teams about your decision. Then you can follow with the email blast.”

“Agreed.”

“Let me put together something for the VPs.”

That took much longer as she needed to explain some of the logistics—including the fact overtime would be authorized the following week for anyone working on year-end systems.

Not ten minutes after he authorized and sent that letter, his phone rang. *Brigitte*. News certainly traveled fast.

After staring at the screen for a moment, he swiped the red X to reject the call.

Mid-afternoon, a woman he didn't know entered the anteroom, bearing a tray of cupcakes.

With a cheery hello, Kaylee went out to greet her. Shamelessly Frost eavesdropped on the conversation.

“It's my mom's birthday tomorrow,” she explained to Kaylee. “Her friends are hosting a tea for her, and it means the world that I get to be there as well.”

“That sounds like so much fun. Scones and everything?”

“With clotted cream.”

“Oh my God. I’m envious. I hope it’s a wonderful experience.”

“I know you; this was all your doing.”

Right away, Kaylee corrected her “Actually it was Mr. Frost.”

The woman laughed. “If you say so.”

“I promise you; the idea was all his.”

He appreciated the note of loyalty in her voice—something he’d thought he’d never earn.

“Anyway, Kaylee, the cupcakes are for you. My way of saying thanks.”

“That’s so kind. Enjoy your time away. And happy birthday to your mom.”

“She’ll appreciate that. Then after Christmas, I’m going to sleep for a week.”

Kaylee’s phone rang. After excusing herself, she returned to her office and closed the door.

About ten minutes later, he’d had enough of her remoteness.

He pushed back from his desk and strode to her office, knocked once, then turned the knob.

She was standing near the window, still on her cell. As she looked at him, her face paled. “I’ll need to call you back later. My boss just walked in.”

An unspoken word hung between them: *Uninvited*.

“I’ll be sure to let you know. And merry Christmas.” After ending the conversation, she crossed to the desk and slid the device onto the top, face down.

Interesting.

He didn’t have a right to ask who she’d been talking to. But that didn’t slow him down. “Everything okay?”

She gave him a fake, sunny smile. “Fine.”

Her cheeks turned red, and her expression faltered. Her response was a lie, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it.

But she offered no further explanation. “Did you need something?”

To spank her until she became the yielding woman who’d given him everything for two days. “Dinner.” Anything to spend time together.

Kaylee shook her head. “I was planning to bake tonight. I’m in charge of bringing desserts to Christmas dinner. And I didn’t have the time I expected over the weekend to finish up my shopping. I still need a gift for my mother.”

“You were anticipating working tomorrow,” he reminded her.

Her chin remained jutting.

“I ordered my grandmother a spa package at the Maison Sterling.”

Interest flickered in her eyes.

“Since I need to pick up the gift certificate, I thought you might want to go with me. And I understand the entire place is decorated for the holidays.” The hotel was renowned for its

seasonal displays. Though that kind of thing didn't normally appeal to him, he was willing to bet she would enjoy it. "A festive cocktail, a bite to eat. And an enjoyable hour." Or two. "What do you say?"

"They have shops, right?"

Her eyebrows were furrowed, which meant she was considering the offer. Now all he had to do was lead her deeper into temptation. "Several. I'm sure you'll find something for your mother."

When she hesitated, he added, "Jennings is waiting."

"I need to clean up my desk. If you want to go on ahead, I'll meet you there."

No chance. With her remoteness—maybe even skittishness—he wouldn't put it past her to change her mind. "Fifteen minutes work for you?"

As if he'd won a great battle, she sighed.

Victorious, he returned to his office and saw another three missed calls from Brigitte and two more voicemails.

Who knew a satellite connection from the middle of a warm ocean was so good?

After clearing the notifications and responding to a few emails regarding his management business, Frost hooked his blazer with his finger and returned to the anteroom where Kaylee was once again righting the star on top of the sad-looking Christmas tree.

How many years had she done that for? And would she continue under a new executive the next holiday season?

When she was finished, she picked up the box of cupcakes, then followed him into the hallway. He turned right while she

went left.

Simultaneously they stopped and faced each other.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“The private elevator.”

Her lips momentarily parted. “Of course. The world wouldn’t dare keep you waiting.”

Rather than arguing, he offered an explanation. “That’s where Jennings is parked.”

“I see. Can you pick me up out front? I’m taking these treats to the security staff.”

Finally he relented. “I’ll go with you.”

While they waited for the regular elevator, he notified Jennings of the change of plans.

Moments later, the compartment doors closed, sealing them in together.

“I didn’t realize that executives got all these perks.”

He studied her.

“Private parking too, right? If you’re an exec, you don’t ever have to go through the same struggles as your underlings.”

Underlings? Was that how she saw the differences in their job titles?

“Have you considered leasing out the spaces, and perhaps giving one to an employee of the month?” Smiling, she looked up at him. “Executives need exercise too. It wouldn’t hurt them to walk a few extra steps every day.”

Her feistiness stood in stark contrast to the coldness with which she had treated him all day.

As soon as she exited, she headed straight for the marble desk in the lobby, greeting the woman by name and offering the box along with her holiday greetings.

How much of the world around him did he miss? He'd accused Kaylee of not knowing about the severance packages, but he was guilty as well.

Together, he and Kaylee exited the building as Jennings pulled to the curb.

People bustled everywhere, and winding through the French Quarter was a challenge.

Eventually, Jennings arrived at the Sterling's garland-draped entrance. Before Jennings could open the door for them, the hotel's attentive staff had already helped.

"Wow," Kaylee said as an attendant tipped his hat and ushered them into the lobby.

A massive tree brushed the ceiling—an impressive feat, given the height. Nearby a family was taking pictures on a sleigh.

At the sight, he and Kaylee exchanged glances and quick grins.

"The spa first?"

She nodded. "A good idea. Before they close."

They crossed to the far end of the hotel and took the stairs to the mezzanine. In contrast to the busyness of the public spaces, the spa level was a welcome oasis of calm, soft music, plants, and poinsettias.

While she browsed the shelves that were stocked with a dizzying array of bath products, he took care of picking up the bag containing his grandmother's present. As for Kaylee's gift card, he tucked that into his wallet.

After about twenty minutes, she settled on a prepackaged basket containing the hotel's most popular products. Then she selected a candle with some purple-colored flowers crushed on the top.

The clerk packaged each in a rich black bag with gold lettering on the side and tied them with bright red bows.

"Satisfied?"

"Yes." Enthusiastically she nodded. "These are perfect. Mom will love hers."

"Is the other for you?"

She laughed. "No. I'd never pay that much for a candle for myself."

Yet, with the way she'd lingered in the shop, inhaling scents, appreciating the various offerings, she clearly enjoyed finer things.

Frost wanted to be the man to spoil her in the way she deserved.

Back downstairs, the bar was hopping, but they were shown to a table close to a jazz trio.

Christmas had exploded all over here as well, with garland draped everywhere, including hanging from the light fixtures. In a glass holder, a candle burned on the table, a wreath of small pine cones surrounding it.

Less than thirty seconds after they were settled, a server stopped by wearing a Santa hat.

The Quarter's party had been enough for Frost. But seeing Kaylee's grin was its own reward.

While he opted for a whiskey, she selected a Sinful Christmas, which was the bar's version of a White Russian, but heavy on cinnamon and other holiday spices.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, given how busy they were, the server returned with their beverages.

Frost lifted his glass to her while she picked up the stick of cinnamon that rested across the top of her glass and dropped it in her drink.

"Oh my God," she said after her first sip. "With all that spice and cream, and the amount of alcohol, sinful is right."

She took another drink before sliding it to the side. "Whew. That's...potent."

A loud group spilled into the place, so he angled his chair to be closer to her. "We could head to the dining room."

"Are you kidding? I love it here."

He narrowed his eyes. "Is this about the money?"

"Not at all. It's the stuffy atmosphere I want to avoid. I mean, look at all the people."

Many of whom were wearing ridiculous sweaters and exchanging gift bags and laughing raucously.

"They serve food, right? I want a pizza."

Whatever the lady wanted, he'd make happen.

"Sooner rather than later to absorb some of that vodka."

He laughed and flagged down their server, and Kaylee turned in her order.

“Anything for you, sir?”

He'd wanted a sirloin steak alongside a large salad.
“Hamburger?”

“How would you like that cooked?”

That question pleased him. At least they all didn't come off the grill the same way. “Medium rare.”

“Cheese?”

“Pepper jack.”

“Fries okay?”

He was going to ask for a healthier option, but Kaylee's eyes lit up. And he'd take this side of her anytime. “Yes.”

“See?” she demanded when they were alone. “Isn't this fun?”

He leaned toward her. “Fun would be having you all to myself in my dungeon.”

“I... Ah...”

No response?

As she looked away to pick up her glass once again, her hand shook.

Her earlier coldness had made him wonder if their sensual connection still existed. Now he knew. It did, even if she preferred to pretend otherwise.

Moments later, holding her cocktail, she sat back, once more in charge.

More revelers filed in, and the energy seemed to rival that of some Mardi Gras celebrations.

And because he worked all the time, he missed it all.

Their food arrived, and before trying her meal, she plucked a fry from his plate. He grinned. Only couples who were comfortable together did things like that. Progress?

By the time dinner was finished and his fries had vanished without him eating a single one, a couple of the larger parties had left the area, bringing down the noise level, and the notes from the up-tempo jazz music were once again audible.

“Another round of drinks?” their server asked as she cleared the plates away.

“For me.” He nodded, not willing to end the evening yet. “Kaylee?”

Frantically she shook her head. “That one was lethal. Maybe a sparkling water with lime?”

“You got it.”

Within minutes, their fresh drinks had arrived, and Kaylee plucked at the small napkin, once again making him notice her bare finger. “When we were ring shopping, I had the impression you’d been engaged before. Married, maybe?”

“It doesn’t really matter.”

“Again, one of those things that will seem odd if I don’t know anything about your past.”

“There’s nothing much to tell.” As she met his gaze, and pain ghosted through her eyes, she pursed her lips as if resolved. “We’d found my dream ring, and I’d been looking at dresses online.”

Frost waited.

“And then my father’s health declined, and my job became a bigger part of my life.”

He drummed his fingers on the table.

“The short story is that Dwayne felt neglected.” She attempted a smile that was more of a grimace. “So he sought attention elsewhere.”

“Bastard.”

“I tell myself it’s better that I found out when I did.”

“Does that help?”

“Now that I’m over the hurt?” She shrugged fatalistically. “Yes. I wanted—*want*—a forever relationship and everything that goes with it. Pets. Even a mortgage.”

“Kids?” A few days ago, to rattle her, he’d said he wanted four children. Now the idea of seeing her belly swell with his baby obsessed him.

Fuck. What the hell was wrong with him?

Even though they were in public, his cock hardened.

“Not right away, but yes.” Then she stopped plucking at the napkin and sat back as if disengaging from dangerous territory, something he’d be well-advised to do as well.

She paused for a moment, and he didn’t fill the silence, waiting for her to go on. Eventually she did.

“It’s a total fantasy, right? I think I want a fairy tale where two people come together and spend their time working on a common goal.”

“Difficult, yeah. But it’s not impossible. My grandparents had it.”

With a sigh of frustration, she curled a finger into a loose lock of hair. “One thing I hate about the relationship with

Dwayne is the fact I wasted so much time believing in him, in us. And the first time we ran into trouble, he was gone.”

Asshole.

She studied the candle, then moved it to the side before meeting his gaze again. “All I needed was a little space, some understanding.”

“Sickness and health. For richer, for poorer.” Something Greta hadn’t believed in either. “And maybe you’re right that it was better you found out sooner rather than later. Even if it hurts. But I’ll tell you this”—Frost leaned forward—“you were too damn good for him.” Kaylee always put others first, and to be with a man who was so demanding must have caused her internal pain. She needed support, deserved to be taken care of.

“It’s in the past.” She offered another falsely sunny smile. “And my job has kept me so busy I don’t have time to brood or obsess about what I lost and the future I could have had in a perfect world. And as soon as work slows down, I’ll start dating again.”

The thought pissed him off. Was this—what they shared—so easy to forget?

“This time I’ll find someone more suitable.” She met his gaze. “A man who believes in forever and isn’t afraid to commit.”

Fury grinding at him, he finished his drink and signaled for the check.

As usual, Kaylee reached for her purse.

“Don’t,” he warned, his temper beginning to unravel at the edges. All day, her actions had annoyed him. “Don’t you damn

well do it. And if you know what's good for you, don't argue either."

Fire flashed in her eyes.

"I mean it. This is one you can't win."

With a deep sigh, she finally relented. "In that case, thank you."

"Much better." He liked winning, and she turned everything into a battle.

As they left the bar, he possessively placed his fingertips against the small of her back. The idea of any other man feeling as if he had the right to touch her this way sparked agitation in him.

Realistically he realized he had no right to feel that way. But his rational mind held no sway over his primal instincts.

Except for informing Jennings where he wanted to go, the drive back to her place happened mostly in silence, and he wished he had any idea what to say to break the tension he didn't comprehend.

When they arrived at her apartment complex, he turned toward her. "I'll walk you up."

"There's—" Wisely she clamped her mouth shut.

A second point to him.

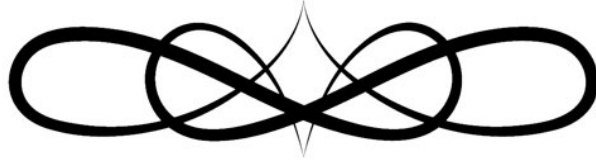
Once they were inside her home, he backed her up against the closed door. There was no way she didn't feel his erection pressing against the softness of her belly. *This*, this was a language they both understood. "I'll pick you up at three-thirty tomorrow."

Then, with brutal dominance, he captured her mouth and devoured it.

When he finally ended the kiss, he dug a hand into her hair, dislodging some of the hair pins she'd used as armor against him. The pieces of metal hit the floor with a satisfying thud.

He tightened his fist, ensuring she couldn't look away, couldn't escape. "When I get here, make damn sure my ring is on your finger."

CHAPTER TEN



Her nerves stretched to their breaking point, Kaylee glanced at the clock. It was almost three, which meant she'd be seeing Frost in less than half an hour.

Everything inside her was in turmoil.

Yesterday she'd decided to keep herself distant from him. With the way she reacted to him, that was a challenge.

And then, while she was still in the office, barely separated from Frost, she'd received a call from Sylvia, her previous boss.

Sylvia had accepted a position at a leading oil and gas firm and was planning to hire several of her own managers in the coming year. She asked Kaylee to think about joining her team. More responsibility. And more money.

She promised to think about accepting a job there.

That she hadn't immediately seized the opportunity bothered her. After all, she wanted to get away from her boss.

If Sylvia had called even a week ago, Kaylee would have immediately turned in her notice.

So why the reluctance to leave Frost?

Maybe because of the way he'd turned her inside out.

After talking to Sylvia, Frost's announcement that he intended to close Christoff for a week—and pay the employees for the time off—stunned Kaylee so much that her resistance to him began to melt away.

When he'd invited her to join him after work, she would have been smart to refuse. But as always, Frost knew how to get what he wanted. Picking up a gift for his grandmother was something she couldn't resist.

To justify her actions to herself, she rationalized that she needed to finish her shopping too. The fact he was going to the Maison Sterling was an added bonus. She'd heard of the hotel and had always wanted to visit, but even grabbing a happy-hour cocktail there would seriously strain her budget.

Knowing the lobby would be decorated for the holidays was tinsel on the tree for her, and she'd ignored common sense in favor of spending time with her fake fiancé.

Which had, once again, been a mistake.

By the time he dropped her off at home, she had to rebuild the walls around her heart and remind herself she was doing this to go to her sister's wedding.

Thankfully, in twenty-four hours, she could put this behind her and forget everything she'd shared with Frost.

The timer on the oven buzzed, shaking her from her reverie and dragging her back into reality.

After removing the cheesecake she was baking for tomorrow, she turned off the stove and hurried to her bedroom to finish dressing.

Three dresses lay on the bedspread. Even though she'd tried each of them on, she still didn't know which to choose. She could have called Frost for his opinion before his arrival, but even the sound of his rich, masculine voice would send skitters of awareness through her. She needed to do everything she could to insulate herself from him, even if it would be short-lived.

Finally, aware of the minutes ticking away, she slipped into a form-fitting blue dress that was too fancy for work but wasn't showy enough for a cocktail party.

It was a good compromise. She hoped.

At three twenty, well before she was ready, he rang the bell. Twice.

Pulling back her shoulders, she responded to his insistent summons.

As always, at the sight of him, her heart rate surged.

He stood there with his suit coat casually slung over one shoulder and a box in his other hand. "May I come in?"

"Uhm...I'm almost ready. Just give me a minute?"

"I can wait."

Her boss clearly didn't know how to accept a polite *no*.

Relenting, she stepped aside.

Without waiting for a second invitation, he closed the door behind him. "You look beautiful."

She met his gaze, and heat smoldered in the depths of his blue eyes, making them smoky. Nervously, she smoothed the front of her skirt, reminding herself she was nothing more than a means to an end for him.

As if they'd been lovers forever, he placed a casual kiss on her forehead.

"This is for you." He extended the beautifully wrapped silver box toward her.

"Me?" His gesture caught her completely off guard "You shouldn't have."

"I assure you; you deserve this and much more."

As she accepted the present, a scowl replaced his smile. "You're not wearing your ring?"

"I told you I wasn't quite ready." Her words were rushed together. "I was afraid of snagging my dress." The excuse was the best she could come up with, and the skeptical tilt of his head proved he didn't believe her. Truth was, she'd been putting off the moment as long as she could.

"Where is it?"

"Safe."

"Where?"

She inhaled. "My bedroom."

"I'll follow you."

Once again, Frost allowed no argument.

With a small nod, she walked toward the back of the apartment, placing her gift on the kitchen counter as she passed.

Behind her, his footfalls echoed with determination.

In her room, she took the box from its hiding spot.

Once she'd turned it over to him, he flipped open the lid. "Give me your hand."

She glanced away as he snuggled the beautiful ring into place.

“That’s better.”

Unable to help herself, she looked at the diamond. It was exquisite enough to take away her breath every time she saw it.

He raised her hand to his lips and placed a kiss right below the radiant, glittering stone.

“Now you’re ready.”

In less than the three minutes that they’d spent together, Frost was already melting away her resolve.

“Would you like to open your gift before we leave?”

“Since we’re probably now running late, I’ll wait until later.”

He nodded. “Maybe with a glass of wine.”

Her breath caught. Was he planning to stay here after their agreement was over?

In the entrance, he helped her into her coat, and she grabbed her purse before hurrying back to the counter to grab the bag containing the candle.

“What’s that?”

“A little something for your grandmother.”

“For my grandmother?” he repeated with genuine shock. “I should have told you I bought her a present and card which I signed with both of our names.”

Another fib in the grand scheme they were creating. “This is a hostess gift. My way of thanking her for having us over.”

He studied her. “Thoughtful. Though wholly unnecessary. But thank you.”

“It’s the right thing to do.” Part of her just wished she wasn’t involved in this lie to begin with.

Outside, his sedan was parked nearby. Surprised, she looked at him. “You gave Mr. Jennings the day off?”

“I figured you would have something to say if I didn’t.” He opened her door.

Though that was true, she hoped it wasn’t the only reason he’d done it.

“Turns out he has someone special in his life that I didn’t know about.”

Oh? How many more times would he surprise her with his generosity? “Then I’m doubly glad you gave him time off. I’m sure they’ll enjoy spending the day together.”

“Yeah.” Frost looked at her pointedly. “It’s a day to spend with loved ones.”

It was. Unfortunately she might be spending it with someone she cared for but who didn’t return the feeling.

Maybe that was the worst thing of all.

With a decisive click, he closed the door before sliding behind the wheel.

As they neared the Garden District, the homes became more and more spectacular.

Then he pulled up in front of a magnificent, white, three-story Queen Anne home with multiple galleries and ornate stained-glass windows.

Especially since she'd seen pictures online, the home shouldn't shock her or leave her in awe, but it did.

Even the magnificent photography couldn't capture the estate's grandeur. The landscaping was beautiful, and an oak tree out front was decorated with twinkling white lights while garland and red ribbons were wrapped around the white fencing, along with every post and rail. She could only imagine it had taken an entire crew a couple of days to make the surroundings so festive.

"Did your mom grow up here?" Kaylee had never been invited into this kind of home before, and if it wasn't for Frost, it wouldn't have happened in this lifetime.

"Yes, and my grandmother also."

She couldn't conceive of that kind of history. Once again, the differences between her and Frost stood in stark and real contrast.

"Are your grandparents the original owners?"

"Actually we've had it a generation longer than that. Evidently my great-grandfather extended a personal loan to a friend who used the home as collateral. When he defaulted, my great-grandfather got the deed, but I understand the house was in shambles. Once he'd brought it back to its original glory, he proposed to my great-grandmother. They were together almost forty years."

So maybe it was good that it ended up in his family's hands.

"He named it the Magnolia Manor. There are a number of trees in the backyard, some that he supposedly planted. In late spring, early summer, they're spectacular. She hosts a barbecue every year when they're in bloom. You'd enjoy it."

She attempted a smile. After today, the closest she'd get to this home was a walking tour of the neighborhood. "It's a jewel."

"It is. But the upkeep is significant as well. Mason Sullivan's company did a second complete restoration on the property about three years ago."

No doubt Master Mason was also a Titan? How deep were the connections between the city's wealthy elites?

"Are you ready?"

Am I? "I'll be honest; I'm a little nervous."

"Don't be." He shot her a wolfish grin. "Unlike me, she doesn't bite."

Warmth spilled through her. "That doesn't reassure me."

"My darling Kaylee, it wasn't meant to." Dropping the conversation and grabbing the gift he'd picked up for his grandmother yesterday at the spa, he jogged around the hood to open her car door.

For a moment, she debated whether to actually take the candle inside. It seemed insignificant compared to the splendor in front of her.

Finally, with a sigh, she reached for the present. She was who she was, no apologies. And after all, this was all Frost's idea. If he wanted someone who understood the rules of his game, he should have chosen a woman from his own social circle.

He offered his hand, and she accepted.

Instead of letting her go, he continued to draw her toward him. Then, when they were against each other, he cupped one of her shoulders. "Gran will adore you. I promise you."

Then gently he moved one hand into her hair and tugged back on her head.

Evidently uncaring that anyone may be watching, he claimed her lips.

If he'd been forceful, she might have been able to deny him. Instead he was tender and reassuring, revealing a side of him she hadn't seen before, and she couldn't help but respond.

“Better?” he asked when he ended the kiss.

She wasn't sure about that, but she certainly was no longer thinking about his grandmother. “Yes,” she whispered.

He traced her lips. No doubt her lipstick was smudged, but she was past caring.

The sounds of excited barks and yips rent the air, bringing her back to the present.

“Grandmother's pack.”

She glanced toward the house. Three dogs had pressed their noses through the openings in the fencing.

“Shelties. Spoiled as hell.”

A woman stood on the porch, waving.

Nerves assailed her again.

As if he were perfectly in tune with her, he reassured her. “You're going to do fine. Trust your instincts.” He took her hand and led her to the gate.

Once she and Frost were on the property, their excited welcome drained away all her tension. No wonder the pups were spoiled. They were excited and so beautiful with their gleaming coats. They each wore a collar decorated with reindeer and wreaths.

One of the tail-wagging enthusiasts jumped on Frost. “Hello, Winnie.” The animal’s head lolled to the side as he scratched behind her ears.

“Sorry!” the woman on the porch called out. “She usually behaves better than that.”

“Don’t listen to Gran.” Frost’s eyes danced with devilment as he looked at Kaylee. “Winnie does what she wants, and if you’re not looking, she climbs up onto the furniture.”

She laughed. “I’d let her get away with anything.”

Before she and Frost could make their way to the porch, Ophelia clapped a couple of times and instructed the pups to “Hush.” Regally she descended the steps. Her shoulder-length hair framed her face, and she’d dressed in a gold blouse and tailored black slacks. Her smile was wide as she looked at Kaylee. “Welcome, welcome. I’m so glad you’re here.”

Kaylee was swept into his grandmother’s genuinely warm embrace.

“It’s about time I met you.”

“The pleasure is mine...” Suddenly she wished she’d asked Frost how she should address his grandmother. Afraid of making a faux pas, she added, “Mrs. Delaney.”

“It’s Kaylee, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She nodded.

“Please, call me Ophelia. Welcome to the family.”

Kaylee went still, and her face heated. She’d known their act might be difficult to pull off, but being swept into Frost’s lie was even more of a challenge than she expected. “I...”

Smoothly he stepped in. “It’s still a little new to us.”

“Mmm.” Ophelia’s reply was noncommittal. “I can’t wait to hear all about the wedding.” Then she offered her cheek to her grandson for a kiss. “My Christmas is now complete. Please come in, both of you.” Then she told her pups to settle down, which they didn’t.

The foyer of the stately manor was every bit as stunning as the outside. Not a single detail had been overlooked when it came to decorating for Christmas, including the soaring, brightly lit tree that had to have been at least twenty feet tall and brushed the ceiling.

“The flowers look beautiful,” he observed, glancing at the tables as he took Kaylee’s coat and hung it from a metal rack on the wall.

“You don’t have to send me a dozen arrangements every year, you know. But I appreciate it.”

Frost had been that thoughtful?

“May I offer you an aperitif?” Ophelia suggested, leading them into a parlor, the dogs trailing behind.

This room, too, had a massive Christmas tree. How many more were there?

“Wine? Prosecco? A spritzer? Perhaps a sherry? Chef is planning to serve dinner at six.”

Chef? Kaylee glanced at her supposed husband who merely shrugged.

“In the meantime, we have appetizers.”

“Don’t eat too many of them,” he warned, “because I’m betting the meal will be something special.”

“I’d love a spritzer, thank you,” Kaylee said. “Very light on the alcohol.”

“Excellent choice. Same for me.” Ophelia smiled at Frost. “Evan, be a darling and take care of that while I give Kaylee the grand tour.” She leveled a pointed look at him, silently informing him her words were a decree, not a suggestion.

Now Kaylee knew where he’d gotten that mannerism. Watching Ophelia use her expression as a weapon against Frost made Kaylee grin.

Helplessly he shrugged. “I warned you Gran is nosy.”

“No such thing.” Ophelia waved her hand to dismiss his comment. “I simply want to ensure your new wife knows her way around so she’s more comfortable.”

“Nosy,” he affirmed, walking his fingers down Kaylee’s spine. “She wants a few minutes alone with you to ask questions.”

I can do this. “First, I have a little something for you.” She extended her meager offering. “A token of my appreciation for hosting us.”

“How very thoughtful.” Ophelia accepted the bag. “Thank you.” Instead of simply setting it down, she opened it and pulled out the candle. “Oh! Lavender.” She inhaled the aroma, then pressed the glass to her chest. “My absolute favorite. I’ll light it each night when I take my bath.”

Kaylee marveled at the woman. Her joy seemed genuine as if the small gesture truly meant something to her.

Still holding the candle, she invited Kaylee to join her.

“Good luck,” Frost mouthed as she followed his grandmother to the beautiful, polished wood staircase.

“We’ll start on the second floor.”

To get away from Frost?

As they climbed, Ophelia provided the story of the house that Kaylee had already heard, but pointed out the room she'd grown up in.

Then she pointed out her current bedroom. In the ensuite bathroom, she placed the candle on the side of her bathtub.

When they reached the third floor, Ophelia pointed out the space currently designated as an office. "But my grandmother used it as an artist's studio. Up until the last months of her life, she loved painting. I display some of her work periodically. And as you can see, the lighting is beautiful up here."

"It is." Even in winter. She moved to a window. "And the view is gorgeous."

"In fall and spring, I enjoy being on the gallery with a cup of coffee, watching the world go by."

"I can imagine." She turned back to face her hostess.

"Evan tells me you're his executive admin. Though he hates that title."

"Oh?" Intrigued, she tipped her head to invite further comment. She'd expected Ophelia to ask her questions but hadn't anticipated that she'd reveal information that Kaylee hungered for.

"He says you're indispensable to him and the business. That he may have the title of CEO, but he couldn't run Christoff without you."

The news shocked her.

"And that he's hoping you'll join him at his management firm."

Speechless, she blinked.

“It can be difficult to work with one’s spouse.”

“I...” She cleared her throat. “We’re managing so far.”

“The wedding was sudden.”

“Whirlwind.” At least that answer was honest.

“We’ll be having a reception, though, at some point, I trust?”

“Things at work have been so busy that we haven’t talked much about it.”

“Mmm.”

“I promise we will.”

At that instant, Frost joined them, carrying two champagne flutes. “Spritzers for my ladies.”

She’d never been happier to see him.

Ophelia accepted hers with a smile.

The pups trailed in behind him, seemingly dragging a little from their long trek up the multiple staircases.

“Kaylee and I were just having a lovely conversation.”

“You were grilling her, you mean?”

“Not at all. Just wondering when we can plan the reception for. People will be curious to meet her.”

“No doubt they will after you tell everyone about her.”

“Well, I’m proud.” She studied Kaylee above the rim of her glass. “Can you blame me?”

“Not at all.” He placed his arm around Kaylee’s shoulder and drew her closer. “For now, I want her all to myself.”

“June would be lovely, after graduations. Or perhaps April, when the weather is cooler?”

“We have to get Christoff righted. Then we’ll talk about it.”

He was so adept at sidestepping potential landmines that he could have been a politician.

“Ready to come back downstairs?” he asked. “Chef has served appetizers.”

The afternoon and dinner were wonderful as Ophelia regaled Kaylee with stories about Frost’s antics as a boy, including his numerous skateboarding crashes and his school grades. “When he applied himself, he was an excellent student. But if the subject didn’t interest him...” With a fond smile, she shook her head.

“That’s enough about that, Gran. I’m sure Kaylee is bored.”

“Not at all.” Kaylee smiled sunnily. She’d learned more about him in a few hours than she had in the time she’d worked for him.

After the exquisite meal, they retired to the second parlor with an ornate fireplace that Frost lit.

The scent of pine filled the air as the wood crackled and popped. All three dogs curled up into beds that Ophelia had placed near the hearth. Now that nighttime had fallen, the beautiful lights seemed even more magical. The atmosphere was comfortable as a holiday should be.

“Nightcap before we open presents?” Frost asked.

“I’ll have a brandy,” Ophelia said.

“Sweetheart?” He looked at her.

At the casual endearment, her heart flip-flopped. Why did the relationship with Frost suddenly seem more real than anything she'd shared with anyone else? "Thanks. I'm good." The coffee she'd had after dinner still hummed in her veins. And honestly she couldn't consume another calorie.

Once he offered a glass to his grandmother, Frost sat next to Kaylee on the couch, uncomfortably close.

"I noticed your ring at dinner." Rather than drinking, Ophelia rolled her glass between her palms "It's beautiful."

"Thank you. I love it."

"The diamond is too small," Frost protested.

Ophelia's eyes twinkled. "According to you?"

His response was dry. "Who else's opinion matters?"

"Clearly your wife's if she won that battle."

"She did."

"So did I," Ophelia confessed. "Frederick—Evan's grandfather, God rest his soul—wanted me to wear his mother's ring. I wanted my own. I'm glad you stood your ground, Kaylee. For something you'll wear every day, it's important you like it."

She forced a smile. If the marriage was real, she'd love the setting. Frost took another sip before standing once more and crossing the room toward the tree. At around twelve-feet tall, this one was much shorter than the one in the entryway.

All three dogs followed his movement, their tails thumping on the hardwood floor.

Crouching, he picked out the bag for his grandmother, then walked it over to her. "From Kaylee and me."

First she opened the card and read it, then gave a small smile. “What a beautiful sentiment. Thank you both.”

Kaylee leaned forward curiously, wondering what Frost had chosen.

Ophelia blinked when she held up a black card from the Maison Sterling. “That’s quite the extravagance, young man.”

“You deserve it.”

“It’s a very generous gift.” She tucked it back into place. “It will certainly cover more than one day at the spa.”

“Or perhaps a spa and an overnight stay?” he suggested.

“Even better.” She placed everything back where she found it before saying, “If you don’t mind, there’s one each for you and Kaylee under there also.”

“Of course.”

She was flabbergasted that Ophelia had even considered her when planning for Christmas.

Once again, Frost crouched near the tree and drew out two boxes, labeled with each of their respective names.

He brought them over and placed them on the coffee table, then turned to Kaylee. “Would you like to go first?”

“I think you should,” she answered, watching him.

After rejoining her on the couch, he pried the lid off his. Abruptly he went still, and a pulse throbbed in his temple. “Is this what I think it is?”

Ophelia nodded. “It is.”

He gently lifted the gold pocket watch from its velvet cushion,

As he did, Kaylee caught a glimpse of the intricately designed owl engraved on the front.

Speechless, he met his grandmother's gaze.

"It belonged to your great-great-grandfather." Ophelia's voice was filled with emotion. "It gets passed down when the oldest son is married."

"But it was never given to my father." Evan's voice was barely a whisper.

"If he'd been worthy, it would have been, even though he isn't a direct descendant. But since your grandfather and I had no sons, we saved it for you."

"I'm...touched."

For the first time since Kaylee had known him, Frost's fingers shook.

His grandmother's gesture had evidently meant a lot to him. He traced the owl with its glittering emerald eyes. From his reaction, the time-honored piece—probably crafted from solid gold—meant the world to him.

With reverence, he returned the watch to its resting place and closed the lid, setting the box aside.

"You're next, Kaylee," Ophelia said.

Heart pounding with anticipation, she accepted the package from Frost and opened the ribbon, then gasped. Cradled in the box was a gold tiara, adorned with precious gems and embellished with intricate hearts, birds, and ornate scrollwork.

At a loss for words, she looked at Frost who pressed his hands together and regarded his grandmother.

“Mrs. Delaney...” Kaylee’s voice faltered as she looked at the family matriarch, a woman she liked much more than she had expected. “This is... I don’t know what to say.”

“Beautiful, is it not?”

“Beyond.” In shock, she took in the history of the priceless heirloom. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart, but this is too extravagant.”

“Not for my new granddaughter,” Ophelia countered with soft, steely resolve.

The word smacked Kaylee in the face. She wasn’t Ophelia’s granddaughter, and never would be.

“The piece is from the family collection and has great sentimental value. All of our brides have worn this exact tiara.” Obviously unaware of Kaylee’s turmoil, Ophelia went on. “It’s yours to keep now.”

Numb, reeling, Kaylee stared at the keepsake and struggled to find words. “I’m afraid I don’t know what to say.”

“I’m positive the piece will be in good hands, safe for future generations.”

Around her, the room seemed to spin. Ophelia was convinced that Kaylee and Frost were going to be having children. The charade had gone too far—and the consequences were more far-reaching than she could have imagined.

As if sensing her emotional struggle, Frost reassuringly placed his hand on her knee.

“I’m humbled and honored.” Then struggling past the sudden lump in her throat, she added, “Thank you.”

“Perhaps you could wear it to the reception.”

She tried—and failed—to smile.

“That’s an excellent idea, don’t you agree, Evan?”

“Absolutely, Gran.”

At that point, Ophelia instructed her whole house computer to play Christmas jazz. Though the music and conversation flowed around Kaylee, her inner turmoil kept her detached from the holiday cheer.

The moment they left Magnolia Manor she would ensure Frost received the tiara back to give to his real bride.

The thought rocketed anguish through her. But right now, surrounded by the love of a family that wasn’t hers, she was absolutely certain of one thing. She couldn’t do this any longer, even though she’d promised to serve as Frost’s hostess for his New Year’s Eve party.

After another half hour of keeping her emotions in check while pretending to be interested in memories of Christmases past, Ophelia shook her head and offered an apology. “It must be dreadfully boring to you since you don’t know most of the people I’m talking about.”

“Not at all.” It was just another reminder that she was an outsider, and that she didn’t belong in their circle. “I appreciate your sharing the stories with me.”

“Another brandy, Evan?”

He glanced at Kaylee.

She seized the first excuse she could. “I still need to finish making the truffles for tomorrow’s gathering.” Trying to find words that were the truth, but easy to misinterpret, she added, “My family celebrates the holiday on Christmas Day. My mom still likes to do all the cooking, but a couple of years ago,

I took over the desserts. I'm afraid I go a little overboard because everyone has different tastes. One likes my chocolate pecan pie. Another is crazy about cheesecake. Of course, no holiday is complete without cookies, candy, or pumpkin pie. But my mom has a weakness for red-wine truffles. And, ah, since it's our first gathering since my father passed, I want to get there early to help out."

"Of course. I'm sorry I kept you so long."

"No, no." Urgently she shook her head. "Please don't misunderstand. I've enjoyed every moment here, and I hate to leave. I so very much wanted to meet you after all the wonderful things that"—Kaylee had to force herself to use the name Ophelia would expect to hear—"Evan has said about you."

"One thing I've missed is family dinners. It would be nice if the two of you could make a habit of joining me on Sunday afternoons? It doesn't have to be here. A restaurant is fine. And even a couple of times a month would be welcome."

Every moment, the situation became even more horrible to deal with. She sincerely liked Ophelia and enjoyed her company. If the relationship with Frost was real, she'd agree in an instant. "I—"

"We'll check our calendars, Gran." His interruption was smooth and easy as he stood. "Shall we, darling?"

In less than five minutes, he'd helped her into her coat, goodbyes and Christmas wishes had been exchanged, and she was seated beside Frost as he made a U-turn on Philip Street.

"What did you think of Gran?"

As if it were a time bomb, she clutched the box containing the tiara. "She's wonderful."

“You impressed the hell out of her.”

He couldn't possibly know that.

As he drove, he made small talk that she responded to in the shortest number of words possible.

Then he pulled into a parking spot in front of her complex—meaning he expected to be invited inside, something she couldn't allow. If he touched her, she might fracture. She sucked in a shallow breath to summon the strength she needed to get through this. “This charade is over.” Her voice cracked.

“What the hell?” After cutting the engine, he turned toward her. Even in the dark, she felt the impact of his scowl. “Kaylee—”

“I mean it, Mr. Frost.” She retreated behind formality. Then, frantically, she shoved the box at him, and he refused to take it. “This is yours. I mean—” She blinked back tears. “It's your wife's. Your *real* wife.”

“Wait. We need to talk.” His voice was implacable, but she didn't back down, couldn't. Everything was on the line.

She wrenched off her fake wedding ring.

“Fuck it all, Kaylee. Stop. Please. I'm begging you. Can we talk?”

She placed the box on the console and dropped the ring inside.

When he grabbed hold of her hand, she wrenched it away.

“Goddamn it!”

Had she expected this to be easy?

“The ring is yours, no matter what.”

“No.” Frantically she shook her head. Her thoughts ran together, and the urge to run filled her, making her pulse thunder in her ears. “It was never anything more than an expensive prop.” The lie nearly choked her. To her it had been so, so much more. Which had made it difficult to wear. At some point, deep down, she’d fallen in love with him and wanted the whole thing to be real.

“Look...” He sucked in a shallow breath. “Why don’t we talk about this tomorrow? You agreed to cohost my New Year’s party. That was part of the deal. Maybe—”

“You can keep your money.”

“Think about this, I implore you.”

“I’ll find another way. Or stay home. I can’t keep pretending.”

“There’s nothing pretend about our sex, the way you respond to me.”

Frantically she shook her head. “Sex is only one part of life. People have feelings.” *And mine are being shredded.* “Your grandmother... God.” A tear squeezed from the corner of her eye. “She believed it. Which is what you wanted. But, damn, she’s going to be hurt, and I never signed up for that.” Frantically she tried to blink away the tears, but they fell, unchecked. “She thinks we’re going to have kids. Gave me a family treasure. How...” Kaylee gasped for air. “How could we have done this to her?”

He reached to wipe away the dampness from her face, but she captured his finger. “Don’t. Don’t touch me.” *If you do, I might come undone.*

Driven by desperation, she forced the door open.

“At least let me walk you inside.”

Refusing to answer, she fled, his vicious curse word echoing on the night air.

As if escaping from the hell of her own making, she ran up the stairs, and once she was inside, locked the door.

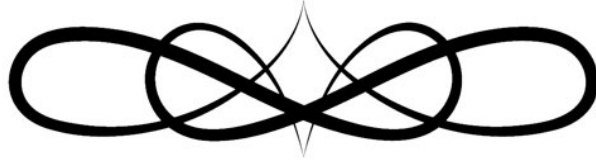
Shaking, she collapsed on the couch, wrapping her arms around her upturned knees and dropping her head onto them.

She had thought the breakup with Dwayne had destroyed her, but she had never come close to this depth of feeling before. Evan Frost filled up so much of her life—dominating both work and private—that she'd foolishly fallen in love with him somewhere along the line.

Stupid, stupid...

Then, as sobs racked her body, her soul shattered.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



What the fuck?

In stunned silence, Frost sat there, watching Kaylee flee, fighting against every damn male instinct that urged him to chase her down, throw her over his shoulder, and drag her back to his house where she belonged, then fuck her senseless until all the struggle left her.

Instead he was forced to grip the steering wheel until his knuckles whitened.

This was so fucking wrong.

They needed to talk this out, come to some sort of...

What?

Compromise?

For Frost, there was no compromise.

He wanted her in his life on his terms, and she'd refused to even talk to him. Until now, he'd known how to get what he wanted with her. But this version of her, with insurmountable walls, was one he'd never faced before.

All he knew was she'd been frantic to get away, despite his stupid, clumsy attempts to hold her money hostage. The truth was, she'd rather skip her sister's wedding than spend time with him.

What the hell was even happening here?

A security guard riding a golf cart stopped behind him and strode to Frost's car window and tapped on it with an oversize flashlight. "Everything okay, sir?"

"Yeah. Just leaving."

"Visiting someone?"

"Just leaving." This time the words were closer to a snarl.

With a nod, the man returned to his cart and pulled up several feet before stopping again to ensure Frost did as he said.

At least the complex was safer than he'd originally thought. Small comfort.

He started the sedan's engine.

Then he noticed the box where Kaylee had left it after she'd tried to shove it into his arms.

He picked up the gift.

What the hell had that been about?

Greta had expected to wear the family tiara. But even though they'd had a date set, Gran had kept it firmly locked in her safe. But today, within hours of meeting Kaylee, Ophelia had turned over something priceless and a tangible piece of their family's history.

As he'd grabbed their presents, he'd seen a second package with Kaylee's name on it, nestled in the branches of the tree. No doubt Gran had a back-up gift in case she hadn't liked Kaylee.

He dropped his head against the back of the seat, seeing the situation through Kaylee's eyes.

Of course, she would consider all the implications of his Gran's gesture. While he'd found it interesting, even bemusing, the offering had tugged at Kaylee's heartstrings.

The security guard honked his horn, and Frost lifted a hand in acknowledgment, grabbing the tiara to move it to the floor of the passenger compartment. As he leaned forward, he caught a whiff of her perfume, innocence and seduction, igniting a potent reaction inside him.

As he stopped at the complex's exit—aware of being watched the whole way—he had the presence of mind to punch a button on the car's dash. “Jolly? Auto drive.”

Maybe there was something in his tone, but for once the computer engaged without argument.

“Destination?”

With the swirling cocktail of anger and frustration gnawing at him, he knew he'd never get to sleep. “Christoff Investments.”

“Acknowledged.”

Every part of his brain demanded action.

He couldn't just let her walk away like this.

Once again, he pushed the button to interface with Jolly. “Call Kaylee.”

A fraction of a second later, the sound of a ringing phone filled the vehicle's interior.

When voicemail picked up, he swore. “End.”

Because he had to do something, anything, he tried another two times before he arrived at the building.

Even as he entered the executive elevator to his offices, he thought of her and her chastisement about perks for executives.

She was right about that as well.

What could it hurt to reassign a handful of parking spots to exemplary employees? Hell, maybe he should even give up his own.

He tapped his watch. “Jolly, send a note to HR letting them know we’re implementing an employee of the month awards program. I want program guidelines drafted by the tenth of January.”

“Acknowledged. Shall I let Ms. Robbins know you liked her suggestion, and that I presume you’ll be reassigning some parking spots in lot A?”

“You’re only supposed to be listening if I give permission.”

Silence filled the compartment.

The elevator bell let out a loud ding, signaling he’d reached his floor.

“I’ll take that as a no then, Frosty.”

“Yeah.” Then he reconsidered his answer. “On second thought, yes. Send her an email. No. Wait. Belay that order.” Any reason to stay in touch. “Send her a text message.” Something she was sure to see immediately.

He entered the suite and turned on the light. The star on top of the tree was listing again, summing up his mood.

Then it hit him. He’d given everyone, including her, a full week off work.

Goddamn it.

Frost slammed the door.

An ornament that had been precariously perched on the end of a branch crashed to the floor.

After grabbing a gym bag from his office, he jogged down the stairs to the fitness center.

For the first time in his life, he was at a total loss.

When his father had lost the fortune and Greta ended their engagement—keeping the ring—he'd compartmentalized his emotions and outlined the next dozen logical steps, seeking the counsel of trusted members of the Zeta Society, meeting with lawyers, relocating his father to the remotest reaches of Alaska, forming a corporation, starting his own business.

When his mother passed, the grief had been devastating, but then, too, there'd been a list of things to do, a funeral to plan, a reception to organize.

But now...?

Kaylee was gone, wouldn't answer his calls, had refused to be his hostess for the New Year's Eve party, and she wouldn't be back to work for a week.

He dug his hand into his hair. *Fuck that.*

Determined to clear his thinking, he changed into workout gear and headed for the treadmill. Even wearing earbuds, pounding out miles to a seminal album from Slipknot, he couldn't banish thoughts of Kaylee from his head.

Frustrated, obsessed, he switched to free weights until his muscles burned.

No better than he'd been an hour ago, he restarted the album and hit the rowing machine, punishing his mind and body as if the demons of hell wanted to drag him under.

And maybe they did.

Finally, heart rate in dangerous territory, drenched with sweat, he eased off his strokes.

And the moment he did, images of Kaylee flashed through his mind, smiling, uptight hairdo, lecturing him about employees, bent over her couch, spreading her legs for him, trembling beneath his lash.

He closed his eyes, and the last picture vanished.

The workout hadn't cleared his head. It had left an empty void where his future had once been.



“You’ve been crying.”

Kaylee sighed as she paced her apartment’s living room, her phone pressed to her ear.

As usual on Christmas morning, Loree called. She’d been bright and chipper, and Kaylee had responded in kind. Or so she thought.

But she should have known better than to think she could hide anything from her little sister.

Until their mom met the man who’d become their stepfather, it had been the three of them against the world. Even though they now had younger siblings, she and Loree shared a deep connection, one that a thousand miles and infrequent conversations couldn’t sever.

Still, because of the holiday, and knowing how busy Loree was with school and wedding planning, Kaylee forced a false pretense. She hated burdening anyone one else with her emotional angst. “Everything’s fine.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

The levity made Kaylee laugh, a welcome respite from the overwhelming grief of the last twelve hours.

“Nice try, big sis. I know the sound of your voice well enough to know when something’s going on. Now tell me. Or I’ll pester you with questions until I pry it out of you.”

Of that, she had no doubt. “It’s silly, really. You don’t have time for this. And we should talk about happy things.”

“It’s the bosshole boss again, isn’t it?”

Kaylee didn’t respond right away, and her lack of answer was enough for Loree to jump to conclusions.

“Aha! I knew it. It’s always him. So—what?—didn’t he approve your time off request? He’d better not keep you from being my maid of honor.”

“Nothing will stop that.” She still wasn’t one hundred percent sure how she’d make it happen. But once she’d struck a deal with Frost, she’d allowed herself to mentally plan the trip.

Now, even if she had to max out her credit cards and drive her clunky car halfway across the country, she was going to the wedding.

“What did BH do again?”

“BH?”

“Bosshole. Keep up. You told me you’re working this week. Honestly, Kaylee, I think you log more hours than most resident doctors.”

“Not even close.” Which Loree knew because she and Joshua would be starting their own residencies in a little over a year, and they’d heard horror stories the whole time they’d been in med school. “And actually, he decided to close the company until after the new year.”

“Shit. Hell froze over, didn’t it?”

Talking to her sister was the balm Kaylee’s soul needed.

“Okay, so the problem is Frost but not overwork?” Loree lowered the pitch of her voice. “Tell me what happened.”

“It’s complicated.”

“I’ll ask questions if I can’t keep up.”

Which was why she excelled in school. “It started with him playing Santa.”

Loree laughed. “I’m sorry. I want to be serious, but really? Evan Frost as Santa?”

Not long ago, she’d have found the idea equally as ludicrous. “If you remember, I was Santa’s elf at the Quarter.” She was grateful she could tell her sister anything and everything.

“Oh yes! And Master Denton was supposed to be Santa. Wait... Wait...”

Across the miles, it was obvious Loree was making the connections.

“Frost is a Dominant, and you were *his* elf? Oh my God. You didn’t run away screaming ‘hell no’?”

In retrospect, maybe she should have. “He made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. Time off with pay and a first-class airline ticket.”

“Tell me you didn’t agree to that?”

When she remained silent, Loree exhaled softly.

“Oh, sis. You sold your soul to that devil for me?”

“It’s actually worse than that.”

Loree took a moment to reply. “How is that even possible?”

As Kaylee unwound the story, she walked into the kitchen to refill her coffee for the fourth time.

While she was there, she saw his unopened present. Though she’d moved it from place to place, she hadn’t been able to look inside.

Just the sight of it made a lump form in her throat.

“Kaylee?”

Jolted back to the present, she continued, sharing the broad strokes, but not the secret, intimate details. She concluded with Ophelia gifting her a family keepsake.

“And you couldn’t accept?”

“It didn’t seem right.”

“You know that none of this is on you, right? Frost is the asshole who dreamed up this whole thing. The consequences are his. But what I don’t understand is why you’ve been crying over Ophelia.”

Trying to settle her emotions, she picked up her mug. But her hand trembled and her drink was in danger of spilling over the mug’s rim, so she placed it back on the counter.

“The situation would upset me as well. But the reason you’ve been emotional is deeper than that, isn’t it?”

How could she admit this to herself, let alone her sister? “I fell in love with Frost.”

She wasn’t sure what reaction to expect from her sister, but Loree exhaled a soft, sympathetic sigh. “Oh, Kaylee. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s—”

“Don’t make light of it. I know you. When you care about someone, you invest your entire soul. So now I understand your reaction to the tiara. You couldn’t accept it because it belongs to the woman he will marry. And that’s not you.”

Kaylee pressed her lips together, trying to keep the sudden anguish from overwhelming her.

“Did you sleep?”

“Not a wink.”

“And that makes it worse.”

By at least a thousand times. But she’d spent another night tossing and turning. She hadn’t gotten any good rest since she’d seen his name on the program at the Quarter.

“How did he react?”

“Not well.” With curse words and that terrifying tic in his temple and worse, by wanting to tenderly wipe away a tear. “But he did tell me to keep the ring.”

“Let me guess, even though it would pay for the airline ticket and solve a lot of your problems, you didn’t.”

It wasn’t even a consideration. “Would you have?”

“Unlike you, I’d at least be tempted. But in the end, probably not. Damn us and our consciences anyway, right?” After a moment, she went on. “Where are things now? Have you talked to him?”

“He called more than ten times.” She’d finally turned off her phone because seeing the screen light up with his name made her heart race, and it lured her into temptation. “But no. I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

With the way she responded to him, there was a remote possibility that he’d be able to convince her to continue with the charade through the New Year’s party. But that would only mean going through this same exhausting devastation again a second time. And maybe it would be even worse, because no doubt she’d surrender to him in a moment of weakness.

As much as she yearned to talk to him, it was smarter this way.

Her sister’s voice brought her back to the present. “How are you planning to keep working with him? I know you’re super focused and determined, but still...”

That was another thing tormenting her. “I heard from Sylvia. She’s got a new job, and she’ll be hiring for her management team. I mean, I don’t have an MBA—”

“Pish. You’re amazing. If you weren’t, Frost would have fired your ass on day one. He knows he’s lucky to have you, and so did Sylvia. At least she appreciated you more than he does.” In the background, it sounded as if Loree took a bite out of something. “Your red wine truffles are to die for.”

“You got them?” Earlier in the month, she’d whipped up a few of her sister’s favorites and used her lunch break to head

to the company's mail room to ship the package, hoping it would arrive in time for Christmas.

"Saturday. But, shh. Don't tell Joshua!" She laughed. "I hid them in the back of the cabinet behind a box of cereal he'd never be caught dead eating."

"With marshmallows in it?" That had been an occasional treat growing up. Most of the time, they'd had buttered toast or whatever pieces of puffed corn or wheat came in a big plastic bag.

"He makes fun of my eating habits until your goodies arrive. Then suddenly he's all Mr. Sweet Tooth. But anyway, if I stuff your tin behind bagels and cereal and then stack tubs of cake frosting on top, they're safe."

"Next time I'll send twice as much."

"No! I still won't share, and that will mean I eat twice as much."

"But anyway, candy for breakfast."

"It's Christmas." She said the words simply, as if that explained everything. Which pretty well, it did. "Anyway, back to Sylvia. Are you going to take the job?"

"I'm thinking about it." For her sanity, she needed to be away from Frost. And Sylvia had already agreed to allow the time off. *So why haven't I accepted the position?*

She rationalized that it was because she could continue to advocate for the employees and make a difference at Christoff. But the truth was, despite it all, she hated to sever the relationship with Frost entirely.

"You'll make the right choice. It can't hurt to go for an interview and explore your options."

That part was true.

“I just want you to be happy. Sometimes we have to rip off the Band-Aid, you know?”

Maybe getting away from him, a fresh start, would help. It had to be better than facing him every morning and spending ten or twelve hours together.

Determinedly she shoved thoughts of him to the back of her mind and asked about the wedding plans and how school was going.

“We don’t have to talk about me, sis. I’m also here to support you as well.”

“I’m tired of listening to the sound of my own voice in my head. And really, hearing about you makes me happy.”

“For real?” Loree asked.

“For real.”

As if she couldn’t contain her enthusiasm one more moment, Loree gushed, “My dress came in.”

“I need pictures!”

“I’ll send some after the fitting. It was a little big.”

That caught Kaylee off guard and concerned her. “Which means you’ve lost weight?”

She laughed.

“You’ve got to do a better job of taking care of yourself.”

“Says you!” Loree laughed. “Anyway, don’t worry. I think the candy will help me put some of it back on.”

They spent the next ten minutes talking about decorations for the venue and dozens of other details before the

conversation drew to a close.

“I miss being home.” This time, Loree’s voice was thick with emotion.

“It’s going to be a strange year.” She glanced at the clock. “Anyway, I promised Mom I’d be there early to help out. Even though she’s always done most of it herself, she counted on Dad for a few things.”

“Pulling the giblets out of the turkey.”

“Eww.” She wrinkled her nose. “You’re going to be the doctor. Are you sure you can’t fly out and handle the icky part for us?”

“You’re on your own. We’re having a potluck with a bunch of other students. And I’m taking corn.”

Her sister was known for many things but not her gourmet cooking. “Please tell me it’s not from a can?”

“Joshua bought it in the frozen section.”

Small mercies.

“We were also asked to bring those sweet dinner rolls from the grocery store’s bakery section.”

“Warm them up. They taste better that way.”

“They’re fine out of the plastic wrapping!” Loree laughed. “With enough butter, anything tastes good.”

After they wished each other merry Christmas, Kaylee ended the call. Then she dumped out her cold, forgotten coffee and poured a fresh cup before starting to gather everything she needed to take to her mom’s house: presents for her siblings, the gift for her mom, and all the desserts.

Today was going to be hard on all levels, not just because of Frost, but because her family had lost the man who'd been their rock.

Again, tears stung her eyes, and she swiped them away as she placed the cheesecake and pies in boxes to keep them safe as she drove.

Then she arrived at the plateful of red wine truffles. Instead of wrapping them or moving them to a zippered bag, she looked at them.

As a rule, she didn't have sweets for breakfast.

But as Loree said, it was Christmas.

The reminder of the conversation made her mind spiral to Frost. What was he doing today? Not that it mattered to her. Working? Going to a gathering? Hanging out with friends? Trying to figure out why the hell she'd walked away from their deal?

If she hadn't run, would they have spent the evening together, along with some of their time off this week?

Instead her house was empty, her gift remained unopened, and the days between now and January 2 promised to be long and lonely, maybe unfulfilling.

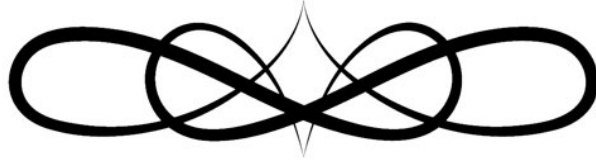
As a lump formed in her throat, she shook her head. Until now, she'd loved her alone time, using it to rest and read business books or sometimes joining Maddie when she volunteered at the shelter.

But today, more than ever, Kaylee's family needed her, and she needed them.

Though she shouldn't, she picked up a truffle and bit into it, trying to chase away her feelings.

It was still a breakup even if only one person thought it was, right?

CHAPTER TWELVE



“Rise and shine, ex-dreamboat.”

As the blinds in his room opened, Frost blinked against the sunlight. What the hell?

He was convinced he hadn't told Jolly to wake him up. “What time is it?”

“Eight a.m.”

Shit. That couldn't be right. He hadn't slept that late in a decade.

He scrubbed a hand down his face, and gritty stubble abraded his skin. When had he last shaved? Or done anything except reach for a bottle of whiskey?

Christmas Day had been spent working out, going for an outdoor run. Then he'd ended up at the Quarter, though he'd never left the bar.

Aviana joined him for a drink, then kicked his sorry ass out after informing him he deserved his heartbreak. He denied that's what it was.

“You need to be honest with yourself at some point, Frost. And I warned you not to play with her. Leave the innocents alone.”

Back at home, chastened, he'd stared out the windows in the dark, drinking, watching the revelers below. Families together, couples laughing. Everything he didn't have.

Yesterday morning—at least he thought it was the previous day—he'd gone through the motions of looking at financial statements for both companies, prepared a revenue forecast, outlined his one-year and five-year strategic outlooks, jotted notes for changes, and he finally accepted a call from Brigitte who said she should fire him.

He'd agreed, then added his final thought. *“But you know damn well you're getting better results than you would with anyone else. So enjoy your vacation and leave Christoff the hell alone.”* Then he'd hung up and instructed Jolly to block any more incoming calls from anybody on the company's board of directors—something he should have done days ago.

After that, he'd consumed enough whiskey to drown in, but even that hadn't been enough to vanquish the haunting image of Kaylee's tear-streaked face.

Yeah, he'd done that to her. And it was his greatest shame.

Heartless bastard.

Aviana was right about playing with innocents. But Kaylee was so much more than that: complex, fierce, a warrior in her own right.

“Shower's running.”

“You bothering me for some particular reason?”

“You have work to do. You've missed calls from the catering company and the DJ for your New Year's Eve party. And the housekeeping staff would like to confirm their schedule.”

He winced, as much against his headache as the realization that a hundred of the city's elite would descend on him in a few days. "You're the chief of staff. Handle it."

"Very well. Looking forward to creating your playlist and sending out your dedications."

"What?" Playlist and dedications? How was he supposed to know that?

"I'm confirming the number of attendees at 102, so you have the right amount of food and alcohol. Assuming you're removing Ms. Robbins's name from the RSVP lists since you were mean to her."

The headache raged. "I was not—"

"She cried."

Jesus. Why was he fucking arguing with a computer? Bonds's AI systems are unreal. "Update me on the changes in the last"—how long had he been in a drunken stupor, unaware of anything going on around him? Forty-eight hours? Seventy-two? More?—"five days."

Jolly listed off names, then added, *"Mrs. Delaney has confirmed, plus one."*

He threw back the bedcovers and got out of bed. Then he saw it. Kaylee's ring on his nightstand.

When had he dug it out of the tiara box and put it next to him? Besotted idiot.

"A Mr. James Hollingsworth III."

What? Frost shook his head. "Who?"

"Your grandmother's companion will be Mr. James Hollingsworth III," Jolly repeated. *"Hollingsworth is a former*

commodities broker from Chicago. He's seventy-three years old, has two ex-wives—one a Chicago debutante, another a California socialite. He has seven children, along with four grandchildren."

"I mean who is he to my grandmother?" And how long had she known him?

"Mrs. Delaney didn't say."

Which meant he needed to find out. A beau? A friend? A gold digger? Gran's wealth made her an attractive target.

"Are you staying in bed all day?"

"Fuck off. Do something useful like make coffee."

"Already waiting."

"Turn off the shower. I'll have coffee first."

"Eww."

"That's it. Call Bonds."

Silence seemed to crackle. *"The Genius is on Do Not Disturb."*

Which may or may not be true. "For me? Or for everyone?" It was much earlier in California. At the same time, Bonds was known to sleep little, if at all.

Once he was upright, the floor tilted dangerously. Just how much liquor had he consumed over the last few days?

Enough to fuck him up. But not enough to forget Kaylee and her impact on his life.

Despite the horrific hangover, his cock stirred as an image of her, draped over his spanking bench, flirted with his memory.

No woman ever impacted him like she did.

Instead of jogging down the stairs in his customary way, he descended slowly, hand cupped on the railing.

As he pulled out the mug of coffee and took a sip, he told Jolly to brew a second. He was going to need a gallon of caffeine to clear the cobwebs from his brain.

After cup number one was finished, the fog started to lift.

But maybe that wasn't a good thing.

He recalled Kaylee sharing the space, laughing at Jolly's antics as she made cocoa.

Restless, he prowled to the sunroom, hoping the bite of morning air would banish memories of her.

It didn't.

Instead he pictured her there, leaning forward interestedly in his conversation, relaxed and for once not at odds with him.

Goddamn it. Was there one place in his house that wasn't haunted by remembrances of her?

Now that he was fully awake, he knew he had to get the hell out of here. He couldn't spend the entire day being moody and morose, thinking of Kaylee and the things he'd still like to do with her—to her—in his dungeon and bed.

Returning to the kitchen, he grabbed the fresh coffee and downed it in a couple of gulps. "Jolly, turn on the shower."

When there was no response, he forced out a vexed sigh. "Please."

"Certainly, dreamboat."

He rolled his eyes, wishing Kaylee had never indulged the computer's ridiculous antics. "Is there a way to bypass you?"

“You could try doing everything yourself,” Jolly suggested helpfully. *“In which case, you’ll need to call the caterers, check the guest list, tell the housekeepers which days and times you’d like them to come, stock your pantry—good luck knowing what you need—find your car in the parking lot as well as—”*

“Enough.” Why had he thought that buying a car and condo preinstalled with a Bonds chief of staff was a good idea?

In under sixty minutes, he’d cleaned up, taken a couple of ibuprofen, and dressed in work clothes. With the state of his insides, food wouldn’t be happening for another couple of hours, he’d bet. And exercise could wait for the afternoon.

When he reached the parking garage, his car was waiting, instrumental music playing at a low volume. Should have been soothing, but it was annoying. “Jolly, play Nirvana. And crank up the volume.”

Not that it would help.

In the office suite, the smashed ornament had been cleaned up, and the top branch of the tree pointed skyward. He’d swear that Kaylee’s scent lingered in the air.

Impossible.

But he knew he wasn’t making it up.

He entered his office and saw an envelope in the middle of his desk.

Gritting his teeth, he snatched it up and read the contents.

Dear Mr. Frost:

Thank you for the opportunity to work with Christoff Investments. I’ve appreciated my time here.

This is to inform you I've decided to pursue other professional opportunities. Please consider this my formal resignation as of today, December 27th ...

He stopped reading and immediately glanced at the bottom for her signature. It was her neat handwriting in blue ink.

Cold fury consuming him, he dropped the letter and envelope into the trash before striding to her office.

The door was closed, and he yanked on the knob without knocking. Maybe she was still here.

Her office stood empty, but here, the scent of her was even more prevalent. That was the only trace of her that remained. The space was devoid of her personal effects—no pictures, coffee cups, or silly souvenirs.

Refusing to believe what he was seeing, he strode to her desk. Clearly labeled keys to the fireproof filing cabinet and the office were on top, and she'd left a pile of papers outlining her job responsibilities along with a list of helpful tips for the person who filled her position.

She'd quit?

Left the company as well as him?

Frost shook his head, unable to comprehend that she'd walked out of his life forever.

Aviana's warning echoed in his head. Kaylee would leave of her own volition. And she had.

Just like Greta had done.

Filled with hot anguish, he slammed his hand on the piece of paper, wadded it into a ball, and threw it at a wall. "God fucking damn it to hell!"

“You’re a difficult man to find.”

He pivoted, then blinked at his grandmother. What the hell was she doing here? “This is a bad time.”

“Is it?”

She approached, carrying two large cups of to-go coffee. “Thought you might need this. There’s a cart in the lobby, lots of pastries, and they’re not doing a lot of business.”

The act struck him; Kaylee would have done the exact same thing.

“I’ve tried to call you a couple of times, but you’ve been on Do Not Disturb. Jolly told me you were at work.”

“I’m going to reprogram her. Already reached out to Bonds.”

“Mmm.” After offering the coffee, she presented her cheek for her customary kiss.

Struggling to tame the adrenaline that thumped through him, he attempted to be civil. After all, he’d been raised that way.

Without an invitation, she took a seat, seemingly unperturbed by his agitation. “Where are all your employees?”

“Kaylee convinced me to give them the time off.” Which in retrospect was ridiculous.

“Glad to hear it. Your grandfather used to do the same.”

Did he?

“And Kaylee?”

He dropped into her chair.

“My dear Evan. You look like hell. No sleep? Too much whiskey?”

Not knowing where to begin, he didn't respond.

“Do you want to tell me where your runaway bride is?”

He exhaled and took a drink before going for brutal honesty. “She's not my wife.”

“I see.” Unruffled, she regarded him.

“You don't seem surprised.”

“Not in the least.”

He blinked. For the third time since he walked through the door, he couldn't comprehend the events around him.

“Evan, Evan. You would have never gotten married without telling me. You're not that good at keeping secrets or hiding.”

Could be true. One time when he'd gotten in trouble at boarding school, he'd called home and confessed before the headmistress had the chance to.

“I can surmise that you didn't want to marry Milena.”

He angled his head in agreement.

“So you found a woman of your own, which I always hoped would happen.” She paused, then, with a sage nod, added, “Kaylee is an excellent choice.”

“It wasn't real. And she's gone.”

“Why do you suppose that is?”

“How the hell do I know?” Frustration at the boiling point, he pushed back from the desk and strode to the window.

Then, dragging his hand through his hair, he faced his Gran again.

Though she regarded him, she said nothing.

“You should know. In every way possible, she told you after dinner at my house on Christmas Eve.”

The fuck? He scowled. “Did you two have a private conversation I know nothing about?”

“There was no need. It was apparent.”

He couldn't have been more oblivious, and his grandmother had seen what was happening?

“She cares for you, Evan. Deeply.”

“I think you're mistaken.”

“Am I?” Regarding him, she drank her coffee.

He folded his arms. “Go on.”

“You didn't notice the way she looked at you?”

Sub to Dom, maybe. But with affection? That he wasn't sure of.

“The gift she brought me.” She smiled. “Much as I love you, I'm aware of your shortcomings. It would never have occurred to you to suggest such a thing. Which means Kaylee did that all on her own.”

He didn't even know a hostess gift existed.

“Shall I go on?”

“Kaylee doesn't carry a designer purse. Or wear expensive clothes.”

“That's shallow, Grandmother.”

“You misunderstand.” For the first time, she scowled at him. “Listen with two ears, young man, before I box them for you. I won’t tolerate your disrespect.”

He winced. “My apologies.”

A moment later, she nodded. “Consider the argument you two had about the ring.”

“You got me.” Frost returned to his seat—what was rightly Kaylee’s chair. “What do those things have to do with each other?”

“She’s so unlike anyone you’ve ever been linked with.”

“Greta, you mean?”

“Exactly. Did she want a small diamond? With the way she posted it all over social media...” She shuddered. “So tacky.”

“The story you told Kaylee about your ring, was it true?”

“Absolutely. I wanted something to symbolize the way I felt about your grandfather. I had no interest in impressing anyone in the outside world. Kaylee reminds me of myself. And the gift she brought me? It might have seemed small to you, but it was thoughtful. Caring. And I know damn well it was expensive, so it stretched the budget she no doubt has. And yet she did it.” Ophelia shook her head. “You’re still not fully understanding, are you?”

No doubt she intended to enlighten him.

“Kaylee doesn’t care about who you are or what you can provide for her.”

“And you know that...how?”

“Her reaction to the tiara. Oh, Evan, you should see it. She understood what it meant from an emotional standpoint. There

was no way she could accept that gift. Am I wrong?”

“On the contrary. She shoved it back at me.”

“And told you it belongs to the family?” She nodded knowingly. “To your future wife?”

Kaylee’s vehemence still took him aback.

“Did she cry?”

Her raw emotion, and his impotence to do anything to soothe her, still haunted him.

“If she didn’t care for you—love you—would she have reacted that way?”

“What?” *Love?* “You can’t be serious.”

Ophelia leaned forward to place her cup on the desk. “The question is what do you want, Evan? I’ve watched you. I’m proud of you. What happened with your dad and how it destroyed your mom would turn anyone off to the idea of love. And then there was Greta.” She brushed her hands together. “Good riddance. At least she showed who she was before she got her claws in your bank account.”

“You saw it. Which was why you didn’t give Greta the tiara.”

“Would have been over my dead body. And I mean that. You’d have had to give it to her from my inheritance. When that woman looked at you, she saw dollar signs and the type of lifestyle she wanted. She didn’t see you or your needs. Her parents spoiled her, created an entitled little bitch.”

He blinked. His gran was always so refined that the mild curse shocked him.

“They turned out to be garbage as well, abandoning your mother when the scandal happened.”

“Like most of her friends.”

“It’s when the truth is revealed, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

“And there’s Kaylee...”

The woman he was obsessed with. Enough so that he’d placed her ring on his nightstand. As a reminder of what he’d lost?

“You can spend your life bearing the wounds left by others, be cold and distant hoping to protect yourself. No one, especially me, would blame you. But I saw you with her, your tenderness, the glances you shared, your gentle touches, the way you wanted to protect her.” She folded her hands in her lap. “What do you want, Evan? If my suspicions are correct, getting it may require taking the biggest emotional risk of your life.”

“But she walked away.”

“You’re thinking her behavior was reminiscent of Greta’s?” Gran guessed.

Kaylee hadn’t even given him the opportunity to talk things out—and maybe she wasn’t open to compromise.

“I take it she needed her job.”

He knew exactly how much she and her family counted on her income.

“Your ex walked away because of a lack of funds. Kaylee left despite her need for a paycheck. Big difference.” With that, she stood. “That girl loves you, Evan.”

“You can’t be sure.” Could she?

“I can tell you this; you come by your stubbornness honestly. My daddy had to encourage your grandfather to propose. He couldn’t believe I’d have him.”

“Another true story?”

She crossed a finger over her heart, in an age-old gesture to vow she was telling the truth. “If you want her back, you’ll have to give her everything she wants.”

“Meaning?”

“My dearest Evan, you’ll have to tell her how you feel, risk your heart.”

All that?

“And you’ll need to grovel.”

Long after she left, Frost remained where he was as if paralyzed, Gran’s words echoing in his ears.

She believed Kaylee loved him?

He wasn’t as convinced, maybe because he didn’t deserve a woman as beautiful, as caring as she was.

Was he even capable of feeling that depth of emotion anymore? He’d loved Greta, or at least he’d thought so at the time. But when she’d walked away, part of him had been relieved.

Now though, with Kaylee? Ever since Christmas Eve, the weight of his grief buckled his knees.

Gran was right; he’d hardened himself after the scandal. It had given him resolve and helped him survive and claw his way back to the top.

Going to Kaylee would be akin to ripping open his heart and throwing it on her mercy.

But in that moment, an invincible truth hit him.

He loved Kaylee. Totally and completely.

Love?

And that meant she was worth any risk. Even if he ended up destroyed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Even though Grandma’s Kitchen was ridiculously loud with its banging silverware and plates, along with the sounds of laughter and conversation buzzing around them, and her younger siblings squabbling over the crayons they each wanted to use on the restaurant’s kids’ menus, Kaylee froze, her senses on high alert as if danger crackled nearby.

Glancing up, she scanned the restaurant.

“Everything okay?” her mother asked.

Kaylee shook her head. “It’s fine.” But that was a lie. Her heart was racing, and her awareness tingled.

“Maybe a headache?”

That could definitely be the case. They both grinned.

Even though it was only early afternoon, the day had been ridiculously long. She’d picked up her family a little after eight, and they’d headed to a fast-food restaurant for breakfast. They’d followed that with a visit to the children’s museum. Afterward they’d ended up at City Park to run around, drink too many sodas, and eat too much junk food.

Since everyone—locals and tourists alike—seemed to be off for the holidays, every place they went was crowded. And

because they were probably overtired and stuffed with sugar, the kids had been snippy.

Managing her own feelings was difficult as well.

Christmas dinner had been somber, even though everyone in the family tried their best to act happy. Maybe they should have acknowledged how difficult the day was instead of all trying to be brave for each other.

Too bad Kaylee hadn't thought of that until the next day.

Not that her lack of resourcefulness was a surprise.

Since she'd started the charade with Frost, she hadn't had a good night's sleep. And the numerous conversations she'd had with Sylvia had added to her emotional upset.

Even making the decision to leave Christoff—and Frost—hadn't soothed Kaylee as she hoped it would. Generally, once a situation was resolved in her mind, her mood improved. This time, if anything, it became worse.

She missed him, ached to talk to him, to be with him, catch up. Had he been to the office to see her resignation letter? If he had, what was his reaction?

It shouldn't matter, but it did.

No matter what she tried, she couldn't stop loving him, couldn't get over him.

She told herself to be grateful she had this time with her family; otherwise she'd be at home alone, since her new job didn't start until the middle of January.

So far, she'd volunteered at the shelter, taken a couple of walks, a dozen baths, and read up on the company she and Sylvia would be joining.

But still, she had too many hours in the day.

That sense of unease tickled her spine again.

And this time, her pulse skittered to a halt.

Frost.

Headed her direction, eyebrows furrowed intently, gaze locked on her, his strides purposeful.

She needed to run.

But fear held her in its icy fingers.

Frantically she lied to herself. He hadn't seen her, or he was headed to another table.

But then he closed the distance between them and stopped next to her, close enough that she inhaled his sense of ruthless determination.

“Kaylee.”

Him being here was no accident. How she knew that, she didn't know, but she was one hundred percent certain of it. Evan Frost had sought her out and had allowed nothing to stand in his way.

Obviously he'd seen the resignation letter.

Her mother tipped her head to one side, and the kids stopped arguing to look at the newcomer.

Since he didn't walk away, she had no choice but to perform introductions. “Mom, this is Evan Frost, my—” She started again, “Former boss.”

He quirked an eyebrow.

“Mr. Frost, my mom, Laura Witt.”

“A pleasure, ma’am.” He flashed a devastating smile. “You raised a beautiful daughter. My grandmother loves her.”

Did Ophelia still think that she and Frost were getting married?

“I wish I could say I’ve heard anything good about you.”

Oh my God. “*Mom!*” Could the floor open and swallow her whole?

“There’s a lot of that going around,” he responded wryly.

“Is there something you need?” Kaylee asked, anxious for him to go away.

He reached into his interior jacket pocket and pulled out a handful of shredded pieces of paper and allowed them to rain down on the table like confetti.

She frowned as she looked at him.

“I’m not accepting your resignation letter.”

“That’s—” She shook her head even as she brought her chin up. “You don’t have a choice.”

“Not without talking. I’ve torn this city apart looking for you.”

Had he? “Not here.” Looking around, afraid of causing a scene, she shook her head. “Not now.”

“Here,” he countered, “and now since you’ve dodged more than fifty calls, a dozen emails, and countless text messages.”

Too late, she recalled what he’d said about how he reacted when he encountered obstacles, telling her that he went around them, over, through... “*Or demolish them.*”

Whatever he had to say, nothing would dissuade him.

Once again, he reached into his pocket. Then he slapped an airline ticket down on the table.

“I don’t understand.”

He placed the box containing the tiara next to it.

“I... I...” Frantically she shook her head. “No. I cannot, will not accept that.”

“I saw Gran.”

Everyone at her table continued to watch them, eyes wide.

“She straightened me out.”

Kaylee was surprised anyone could.

“She told me I had to make some hard choices, and I have.”

Struggling to understand, she said nothing because she couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I’m going to start with the absolute truth and go from there.” He exhaled a shaky breath. “Kaylee, I...” Frost dragged his hand into his hair. “*Fuck*,” he whispered so that none of the kids could have overheard him, but she heard the weight of emotion in the laden word. “I love you.”

Her ears buzzed, and her mother grabbed her elbow hard.

“I love you, Kaylee Robbins, with my entire heart and soul.”

Then he lowered himself to one knee.

Around them, people fell silent and turned to face them. Nearby, Julie froze. A few people pulled out cameras, and others pointed to them.

Her heart racing, her mind struggling to comprehend, Kaylee formed her hands into fists, her fingernails carving into her palms.

But he seemed oblivious to anyone except her.

He reached into his pocket again and pulled out her ring.

The stunning oval diamond caught the light, refracting hope and possibilities.

“I want to dedicate my life to you, loving you, caring for you, making you happy.” His voice cracked, making her breath catch in her throat. “Kaylee Robbins, will you do me the ultimate honor and become my wife.”

She shook, burying her head in her hands as laughs and sobs simultaneously wracked her.

“Put me out of my misery, Kaylee,” he begged. “Please.”

“Say yes!” a bystander called out.

This was a dream come true, everything she wanted and had never dared dream possible.

“Yes,” she replied softly. “But we still need to talk.”

Her mother leaned in, laughing. “Make damn sure he deserves you.” With that, she wiped her eyes.

He slid the ring onto her finger, where it belonged.

As she looked at it, tears fell. It was perfect, meant to be. She couldn’t remember ever feeling this light or happy.

Spectators cheered and clapped.

After standing, Frost took her hand and pulled her to her feet, swinging her around, and then claiming her mouth in a passionate kiss once he set her back down.

As people returned to their own discussions, Julie sashayed to the table, carrying a bottle of pricey champagne—a choice he'd been told they didn't carry—and three glasses. "Maybe you're not such an asshole after all." She hugged Kaylee and her mom, offered her congratulations, then disappeared again.

"You might as well join us," her mother said. "Since it doesn't seem we'll be getting rid of you anytime soon."

"Mom!"

Laura reached for Kaylee's hand to look at the ring.

Thank goodness the food finally arrived to occupy the kids and allow the adults to talk. With an ease that surprised and disarmed her, Evan fielded her mother's questions. Finally, once the meal was over, her mom's forceful interrogation slowly turned into something resembling friendly conversation.

But she ended with a warning. "If you make my daughter unhappy, you'll have me to deal with."

"Understood, ma'am."

When the server returned with the bill, he offered his credit card.

Scandalized, Kaylee gasped. "Mr. Fr—"

"Evan," he corrected with a Dom-like scowl that threatened retribution. "And we're family now. I've got this."

"Thank you," Laura said simply. "It's appreciated."

After he signed the receipt, he handed it to Kaylee so she could see the tip. "I trusted you!" she protested. Despite herself, his generosity impressed her.

“No you didn’t. And as my wife, you’ll have a right to know about the financial decisions I make.”

This was a lot, maybe too much to take in all at once.

He leaned forward to address the oldest of the kids. “Will you excuse me if I take Kaylee away from you?”

“I drove,” Kaylee protested. “I can meet you later.”

“No chance.”

She recognized the set of her future husband’s jaw.

“I’ll drive your car, Kaylee,” her mother decided. “You can pick it up when you’re ready.”

Frost drummed his fingers on the table. “Actually, we’ll take it.”

“What?” Perplexed, Kaylee glanced at him. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Jennings can drive your mom and the kids home and then take the rest of the night off.”

“I don’t expect you to—”

He leaned forward and silenced her with his mouth. “I know you don’t. Which is another one of the reasons I love you.”

In the end, they all walked outside together, and Jennings immediately jumped out of the vehicle and came around to congratulate her and Frost and to meet the rest of the family. “I look forward to taking care of you all.”

Within a few minutes, her family was seated and belted in.

Evan leaned in and said, “Hello, Jolly?”

“Hello, Frosty!”

Oh no. Kaylee winced. The kids would never forget that.

“We’ve got company, so behave.”

“Of course, Mr. Frost. Who do we have?”

The kids and even her mom introduced themselves.
“They’ll be part of the family from here on out.”

“Indeed? Well, congratulations and felicitations!”

“Thank you.”

“What is that?” the oldest boy asked.

“A computer.”

“No I’m not.” Jolly harrumphed. *“I’m his chief of staff.”*

“Sorry.” Frost shrugged. “She’s my chief of staff. Very helpful.”

“Indispensable, you mean.”

He exhaled a long-suffering sigh. “Right.” Then he addressed Laura. “Mrs. Witt, ask Jolly to tell us a joke.”

“What does a snowman wear on his head?” Jolly waited for a moment. *“An ice-cap!”*

Everyone groaned.

Kaylee smiled. In this moment, she was content in a way she’d never believed possible.

After closing the door, Evan draped his arm around her shoulders. Then they both waved as Jennings drove away. “I think you won them over.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged fatalistically. “No doubt I have more work to do, and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to earn their trust as well as yours. And thank you for giving me the chance. Your mom might have ripped out my throat if you

hadn't reacted the way you did." He studied her. When he went on, his tone was low and sexy. "I've missed you, and I want to get you home."

Heady desire slid through her. "You're going to find my car much less luxurious than yours."

"As long as it gets us safely to my place."

She shrugged. "If she's in the right mood. Her name's Grumpy Galumph."

"Grumpy Galumph?"

"Don't blame me. That was her name when I bought her. I just didn't change it when I found out how cantankerous she is."

Three minutes later, he found out for himself when he tried to back her out of the parking spot. "Does she need a spa day?"

"The mechanic thinks so."

As the vehicle lurched forward, he glanced at her. "I suppose you're attached to her and don't want to trade her in?"

"A new car isn't in my budget."

"You can drive one of mine—ours," he corrected, "until you change your mind and trade her in."

"Don't say that too loudly."

A light flashed on the dashboard.

"Told you so."

Still, they made it to his high-rise, and he parked it in a reserved spot. The vehicle looked ridiculous among all the sports cars, pickup trucks, and luxury SUVs. But Evan knew Kaylee—a woman who didn't need flashy things.

“Champagne in the sunroom?” he suggested when they were in the penthouse with her coat hung up and her purse placed where she could easily find it. “I want to fuck you senseless, but I imagine you want to talk first.”

She appreciated how much he seemed to understand her. “Yes. You had some time to think this through, but it stunned me honestly. I need a few minutes to wrap my mind around it.”

“You’ll have the rest of your life.”

While she grabbed the crystal flutes, he uncorked the bubbly and poured it.

“To us”—he picked up a glass and offered it to her before lifting his—“and our future. Our happiness.”

She clinked her rim against his, then took a sip. “Holy wow.” It was like air, an explosion of happiness in her mouth. Eyes wide, she looked at the bottle. “That’s not ordinary champs.”

“One of my best. Special reserve for celebrations.”

“Well, wow.” Not at all like the one delivered to their table at the restaurant, even though it had been wonderful and pricey.

Together they walked to the sunroom and took a seat next to each other, facing west to watch day turn into night.

“Hey, Jolly,” Frost said.

When there was no response, Kaylee and Frost exchanged glances.

“Jolly?” he prompted.

“I’m worn out. Too many knock-knock jokes.”

“Poor Jolly.” Kaylee smothered a laugh. But she too had worn down during the course of the week. The kids were a handful.

“Maybe you should babysit more often,” he fired back at the machine.

“Entering standby mode now.”

“No!” Frost protested. “Set the temperature to seventy-two first. And play my Frank Sinatra station.”

“I told you I’m tired.”

“Please,” Kaylee added. “Please play the Frank Sinatra station and adjust the heat.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Frost-to-be. Anything for you.”

“Jesus.”

The future wasn’t only bright. It was interesting.

She curled up under a blanket and regarded the man next to her. That they were to be married was still a marvel. “You tore up my resignation letter.”

“I did.”

“You should know something.” She pressed her lips together and blew a breath through them.

“Go on.”

They had to be able to talk about hard things, right? “Sylvia called.”

His eyes blazed, and his knuckles whitened on the stem of his glass, but he said nothing.

After swallowing another sip, she looked at him. “She’s been offered a job and is hiring her management staff.”

“I see.” That damnable tic was back in his temple.

“I’m planning to join her.”

“Is your heart set on it?”

It had been. “More money, fewer hours. And more vacation time.”

“Sounds like a strategic move.”

One he hated, obviously.

He put down his glass and crossed one knee over the other. “Look, Kaylee, I want you to be happy. If that’s working for Sylvia”—he drummed his fingers on his thigh—“so be it.”

“Thank you.”

“But...”

Of course he’d hedge what he said.

“You have all the options in the world. I know you want to go to school.”

“Something I can’t afford right now. Especially not with my existing student loan debt.”

“There’s money in a family education trust. It was meant for my siblings if I had any, which I didn’t. And I didn’t get a graduate degree. The interest on the funds is enough to pay for your education and that of any children that we may have.”

“But—”

“You will not want for anything.”

She shook her head. “You still don’t get it? I don’t want your cash, just your love.”

“And you’ll have both. So whether it’s going to school, working for Sylvia...” He winced. “Joining the management

team at my company, accepting a bigger role at Christoff, starting your own firm, or staying home and enjoying life or being a mom, I want you to do whatever brings you happiness.”

Her heart soared.

“As long as my ring is on your finger and the entire world knows you’re mine, we can discuss a timeline for the wedding, children, even a dog. We can sell this place and buy a house, or we can keep this place and buy something else as well. There’s no rush.”

He was promising everything she said she wanted that night at the Maison Sterling.

She wanted to pinch herself to be sure it was real. He was putting her needs in front of his own.

“For now, I’m not sure I want to stay at Christoff.” Though she couldn’t imagine not working with him. “I’m not sure I like the board of directors.”

“Struggles between a CEO and board are not unusual, but in this case, I agree entirely. Things might be different under a new leader once we enter the growth and sustainability phase.”

“I could consider staying through August, maybe, and starting grad school in fall? That would help with the transition.” And keep her close to him. “But honestly, I don’t want to work more than forty hours.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, but neither will I. I’d like to spend time uncovering more of my future wife’s secrets.”

She sucked in a shallow breath as he swept his heated gaze over her.

“You shouldn’t have worn a dress today, Ms. Robbins.”

“Oh?” Response flooded her body.

“You’re tempting me.”

“Am I?” She batted her eyelashes innocently. “I didn’t mean to... Sir.”

“That’s it.” He stood and plucked her glass from her hand.

Carefully he slid the glasses on the table. Then, with great intent, he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her.

Before she could figure out what he was doing, he was sitting where she’d been, and she was upside down over his knee, her fingers scrabbling on the floor as she struggled to find her balance.

“God, I’ve wanted to spank your ass.”

“Do it.”

He hadn’t needed the invitation. Even before the words were out, he’d swept the hem to her waist and was pulling down her panties.

“You’re going to stop wearing these.”

“Am I, Sir?”

“And maybe I’ll stuff your ass full of a plug before we go to work in the mornings.”

Her tummy spiraled into a free fall.

Evan brought his hand down on her rear hard, searing her. Gasping, kicking her legs, she pushed off the floor.

“Keep still.” He clamped an arm around her waist, imprisoning her.

Gently he rubbed away the pain.

“That’s so you know you’re mine.”

Tears stung her eyes, not from his spank but from his words.

“Mine.”

“Yes.”

He turned her over, sat her on his knee, then kissed her deeply, in a forever-mine way.

She leaned into him, giving everything in return: her heart, her body, her soul.

Once their kiss ended, he traced a finger down the column of her throat. “And now for a real spanking.”

He turned her back over, spanked her sensually, then fucked her hard, using a condom that was in his wallet.

When she was crying, screaming, drenched with sweat from multiple climaxes, he changed his pace, making love to her on the couch, their gazes locked, hands entwined, promises of tomorrow sealed with a gentle, forever kiss.



“Ask for it.”

Kaylee looked up at her fiancé, her lover, her Dominant, and her mouth was too dry to force out the words.

On New Year’s Eve, just hours before his party—the first of many where she’d be his hostess—and she was tied to the spanking bench in his dungeon, face up, looking at him and the terrifying dragon’s tail in his hand.

He’d secured her tightly, legs wide apart, pussy open and vulnerable to his lash.

“I mean it, tempting sub. Ask for it.”

A few days ago when they'd first played with it, it had scared her witless. But once she'd experienced its delicious sting, she'd fallen in love with its intimate kisses. But still, the sight of it unnerved her.

“If you don't, you won't get it. Nor will I use it on you while I have you bent over my desk at work.”

That was the main reason she looked forward to going back to the office.

Taking the coward's way out, she squeezed her eyes shut. “Please, Sir. Use the dragon's tail on me.”

“My pleasure.” He dragged the tip's edge down her chest, between her breasts, then lower, over her belly, stopping above her pubic bone. “And where would you like me to strike you?”

He was a master of the mindfuck. “Spank my clit and my nipples, Sir.” Even though the tips were sensitive, the feel of this was arousing rather than annoying or painful. It didn't make a lot of sense to her, but the sensations were the stuff of her fantasies. Just like the man who created them.

The last few days had been wonderful as they'd mostly stayed home together, relaxing, enjoying each other as if they were on a honeymoon. She almost hated for the real world to intrude on their private sanctuary.

He pinched her nipples, making them hard before he began to tap the leather against them.

As she relaxed and sank into her surrender, he used the implement between her labia, bringing her clit to full awareness.

“Oh, Sir!”

Relentlessly he continued until she was panting, so turned on that she needed a release.

He sank his fingers into her, finding her G-spot, making her dig her heels into the railing as she struggled to raise her hips against his tight restraints.

Tormentingly he teased her. Then, when the moment her climax started to blossom, he stopped.

She took a moment to comprehend what had happened. And when she opened her eyes, he was standing over her, licking her juices from his fingers. Confounded, she stared at him. “What?”

“Oh, little one. I’m leaving you like that, on edge so that thoughts of me are never far from your mind.”

As if they ever were. “I promise you, Evan, I’ll be obsessed with you even more if you give me a climax.”

“No. Nice try, though.” He chuckled. “But just to make sure.” He left her for a moment only to return with a small metal plug.

In shock, she opened her mouth wide. “You can’t mean to make me wear that.”

“Most certainly I can.” He placed one hand flat on her belly and used the other to place the small, teardrop-shaped toy against her anus.

Instinctively she tightened her buttocks.

He delivered a sharp smack to her pussy. And because she was still inflamed from the dragon’s tail, she screamed out.

“Would have been easier if you’d have relaxed and bore down like a good submissive.”

She gritted her teeth.

He left her there while he washed up. Then he returned to gently stroke between her labia.

Please. Please. His touch was amazing. Soothing. She met his gaze.

“I think that will do it.”

In frustration, she exhaled.

Slowly, taking time to rub circulation back into her limbs, he released her and helped her up. Then he held her and kissed her. “Every day, every minute, I love you more and more.”

Since he’d had Jolly run a bath, she took the time to luxuriate in it before drying off and getting ready for the festivities.

After slipping into the short black cocktail dress he’d bought for her, she joined him in the bedroom.

“Is your mom coming?” he asked, sliding a cuff link in place.

A Titans cuff link. Since they were engaged, he confirmed his recent membership in the organization and suggested that she may want to consider joining as well. That, she wasn’t sure about.

Aware he was still waiting for an answer, she nodded. “She found a babysitter. So I’m glad she’s getting out. I arranged for a limo for her.”

“Good. Did you ask Jennings?”

“He has a date tonight.”

“Does he indeed?”

“I’m happy for him.”

“Tell me again the name of the man who’ll be joining your grandmother.”

He gave a furious frown. “James Hollingsworth. The third. Pretentious much?”

She laughed. “His name is not his fault.”

“No. But his son is James Hollingsworth the fourth.”

“Oh.”

“And now there’s a fifth, like they’re some sort of royalty.”

She studied him. “You sound a little disinclined to like the man.”

“Gran says he’s just a friend. But I’m not convinced.”

“I think your gran has proven she’s very smart and knows what she’s doing.”

“He’s had two divorces, has a lot of kids, and even more grandchildren. What if he’s a gold digger?”

“And what if he is not?” she countered.

He glowered.

“My family gave you a chance. I think you should give Mr. Hollingsworth the same benefit of the doubt.” When he opened his mouth to speak, she rushed on. “I promise that if he’s a scoundrel, I’ll take him apart limb from limb before you can even get to him.”

“That’s my future wife. I love it when you’re fierce.”

At one point that hadn’t seemed possible, and now the idea that they’d be married soon, perhaps within a year, left her dizzy with delight.

“Before our guests arrive...your New Year’s present.”

“Evan,” she protested. “You shouldn’t have. You have to quit spoiling me.”

“Not any time soon.”

Inside the jeweler’s box was a beautiful gold antique locket, and she opened it. On one side was a picture of Frost, all bare-chested and deliciously Dominant. On the other was a rendering of her, kneeling, hands behind her neck, gaze lowered, knees parted.

It sent ripples of submissive awareness up her spine.

“I had the pictures commissioned by Elissa Conroy, a renowned artist.”

“I’ve heard of her. The work is stunning.”

He snapped the locket closed. Then he slid it onto a chain that he secured around her neck.

Next he moved her to a full-length mirror. Standing behind her, breathtaking in his midnight-colored tux that made his eyes even more startlingly blue, he traced the oval that lay nestled just above her breasts. “I want you thinking about the pictures and your naked pussy beneath the dress.”

She tipped her head back, lost in his images.

“Later, when we’re back up here and I have you in the position the sketch represents, we can finish what I started earlier in the dungeon. Each time the plug slips and moves inside you, I want you thinking about how I will devour you with my mouth, my hand, my cock, and my whip.”

Slowly she nodded.

“The words, please, tempting sub.”

“Yes.” Through her eyelashes, she looked at him. “Yes, Sir.” She couldn’t wait.

“Abigail Chapman, Hayes McCall, Zander Henderson, and Maddie Taylor have arrived.”

The conversation she’d had with her friends had been very interesting. All their lives had been transformed by the magical evening at the Quarter.

“Our party is starting.” He took her hand and kissed it.

Together they left the bedroom and descended the staircase toward their future and her happily ever after—the perfect start to a new year and a lifetime of love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I invite you to be the very first to know all the news by subscribing to my very special **VIP Reader newsletter!** You'll find exclusive excerpts, bonus reads, and insider information.

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USA Today bestselling author Sierra Cartwright was born in England, and she spent her early childhood traipsing through castles and dreaming of happily-ever afters. She has two wonderful kids and four amazing grand-kitties. She now calls Galveston, Texas home and loves to connect with her readers. Please do drop her a note.



ALSO BY SIERRA CARTWRIGHT

Titans

Sexiest Billionaire
Billionaire's Matchmaker
Billionaire's Christmas
Determined Billionaire
Scandalous Billionaire
Ruthless Billionaire
Billionaire's Revenge

Titans Quarter

His to Claim
His to Love
His to Cherish

Titans Quarter Holidays

His Christmas Gift
His Christmas Wish
His Christmas Wife

Titans Sin City

Hard Hand
Slow Burn
All-In

Titans Captivated (Ménages)

Theirs to Hold
Theirs to Love
Theirs to Wed
Theirs to Treasure

Titans: Reserve

Tease Me

Hawkeye

Come to Me
Trust in Me

Meant For Me

Hold On To Me

Believe in Me

Hawkeye: Denver

Initiation

Temptation

Determination

Bonds

Crave

Claim

Command

Donovan Dynasty

Bind

Brand

Boss

Mastered

With This Collar

On His Terms

Over The Line

In His Cuffs

For The Sub

In The Den

Collections

Titans Series

Titans Billionaires: Firsts

Titans Billionaires: Volume 1

Titans Billionaires: Volume 2

Billionaires' Quarter: Titans Quarter Collection

Risking It All: Titans Sin City Collection

Yours to Love: Titans Captivated Collection

His Christmas Temptation: Titans: Quarter Holidays

Hawkeye Series

Undercover Seduction: Hawkeye Firsts

Here for Me: Volume One

Beg For Me: Volume Two

Run, Beautiful, Run: Hawkeye Denver Collection