



# Holidays with the Professor

USA TODAY BESTSELLER  
**ALEXA PADGETT**

*Holidays with the Professor*

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Edited by Charity Chimni

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*For my lovely readers. Without you, I couldn't keep writing. I cherish each of your messages and am absolutely thrilled to call many of you friends.*

*Happy holidays and good cheer throughout the year!*

*-xoxo-*

*Alexa*

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**In his world of numbers, Libby's presence turned his life into an unexpected calculation of love, grief, and second chances.**

Professor Jamieson Finch, renowned for his academic brilliance, must confront the variables of life after tragedy thrusts him into single parenthood. When Libby, a determined grad student, enters his world, the equation shifts again.

Their connection is as undeniable as the mathematics they adore. With the holiday season approaching, the timing for a romance is imperfect...and forbidden. Dare Jamieson and Libby embrace the chance for a love that defies all odds?

This heartwarming holiday novella overflows with cheer and the transformative power of two lonely souls uniting to create an unexpected family. "Holidays with the Professor" is a story of hope, healing, and the magic of love during the most wonderful time of the year.

## CHAPTER 1

*Libby*

HUDSON WHIMPERED as he shifted in his car seat, a slight grimace tugging at his tiny brows. I tensed.

No, please don't wake up. Not yet...not here! I held my breath as I silently begged him, too afraid to shift my foot over and rock his carrier even.

Please, please, please....

I don't know why I bothered. My infant son *never* listened. He was adorable, sweet, already smiling whenever he saw me, but he was a terrible sleeper. Worse yet, he seemed to have a sixth sense when something was important to me...and he fussed, clearly not liking my attention on anything—or anyone—else.

Like this lecture with *this* professor. I moved my pen to my left hand, which meant I wouldn't be able to read any notes I tried to take while I rocked the car seat in gentle, soothing motions that sometimes relaxed Hudson back to sleep.

He whimpered again, a bit louder, and a cold flop of sweat erupted from my pores. Please don't cry, *please don't cry*...

I glanced around, my heart pounding. A few students had turned to see where the annoyance was coming from.

I peeked up at the professor—the premier guest lecturer who’d agreed to teach a series here for the semester, an absolute coup for our program, for the university’s students. But he was known to be temperamental, mercurial, even.

And he did *not* like to be interrupted. Ever.

I eased my shaking left hand off my notepad and packed up my things with clumsy speed, my heart heavy with frustration. Not at Hudson. It wasn’t his fault. This whole situation was mine.

Just as I got my notepad into my bag, Hudson’s tiny back bowed, and his face turned redder—possibly redder than mine. He screamed as I grabbed his car seat and tried to wrangle my backpack from the chair.

“I’m so sorry,” I muttered, face flaming, unable to meet the eyes of my nearest classmates. I hurried into the aisle and up the stairs that led to the closest exit.

“*Gawd*. Bringing a baby to class. What an absolute loser,” the girl behind me sneered.

I hadn’t planned to have Hudson with me tonight. I never wanted to bring Hudson to class, but my roommate was sick. I hadn’t been able to find a sitter on less than an hour’s notice. Not that the girl who’d commented on me knew any of that... or cared.

Sweat made my hands slippery, so I heaved Hudson’s heavy carrier onto my forearm as tears pressed against my lids. This class was necessary for me to complete my degree. I’d already postponed last semester and taken a leave of absence the previous semester to deal with the fallout from Hudson’s birth and the trauma surrounding it. I was so damn close to my goal. And I’d been so excited to learn from Dr. Finch.



Only three more stairs to the doors of the auditorium-style lecture room...

“Ms. Dagon. If you would stop running away, please.”

I paused mid-step, shocked that Dr. Finch knew my name...and my appearance. Worse and worse. This was mortifying. Could I die of shame?

Much as I wanted to, I couldn't do that to my son. Instead, I paused there, on the steps, quivering.

“Good. Now, turn around, and let me ask you a question.”

I gulped, desperate to bolt. I looked down at Hudson, who stared up at me. I swallowed hard. I was painfully shy on the best of days. This wasn't the best of days. Sweat trickled freely from my temples, and I fought the urge to burst into tears like Hudson.

“Why did you bring your child with you to class?” Dr. Finch asked.

“That's what I want to know. I mean, *who does that?*” the same sneering girl said, loudly to her friend.

I tightened my lips and gripped Hudson's carrier even tighter, ensuring I kept him safe. I'd always keep him safe. I faced the entire class, desperately avoiding all their eyes and squinting toward Dr. Finch, who stood, one forearm on the podium at the front of the classroom.

“Because my babysitter came down with a stomach bug about twenty minutes before class, and I didn't want to miss this lecture since it's right before an exam.”

“I didn't catch that,” Dr. Finch said.

Of course, he hadn't. I mumbled my response as I inched toward the doors. With a sigh, I raised my chin, then my voice,

and repeated myself.

“So, instead of missing the lecture, you brought the child?”

Face numb, mortification blazing, I nodded.

He climbed the stairs toward me. “And you’ve been here every session, not missing one, this entire semester...” He loomed closer, growing taller. I could make out the brown of his eyes behind his thick-framed spectacles. “While caring for an infant.”

He had a full day’s scruff gracing his chin...and a look of admiration on his face.

“No, sir,” I said. “I mean, yes, that’s correct.”

His eyes flared a little. He took in my appearance: leggings, an oversized sweatshirt, Converse. Typical college attire, nothing that should cause that flash of lust.

His gaze dropped to Hudson and his expression softened as he took in my baby, who had quieted as soon as I picked up his seat. He now stared up at Dr. Finch with as much interest as I felt.

Dr. Finch was a beautiful man. Probably fifteen years my senior, he had a few gray hairs threading through the light brown strands right at his temples. The beginnings of laugh lines feathered out from his eyes, and his lips were soft, pink...quirked up in a sardonic grin.

“You’re also the student who broke the curve, are you not? Libby Dagon.”

I flinched, glancing around as the bored stares turned into furious glares. I shot my own at Dr. Finch.

“Y-yes.” Shit. *Why* did he mention that? I could almost feel all the students sharpening their pencils to stab me in the back.

“Hmmm. Well, give him to me.”

“What? No.” I clutched the car seat tighter to my stomach.

“We have a lot of material to cover, and he doesn’t like his seat. Not that I blame him much—who would want to be strapped down?” He held out his arm, eyes demanding. “I’ll hold him while I lecture. Don’t worry, I’ve done it before.” He said the last as an afterthought, like the explanation would soothe me.

My eyes popped wider, and my jaw dropped. “You want to —”

“If he gets too fussy, I’ll hand him back. But we have functions to sort out.”

My chest seemed to flatten and then expand, and I wasn’t able to right myself, so Dr. Finch took it upon himself to unlatch Hudson, who offered him a gummy grin and a soft gurgle.

“Aren’t you a delight?” Dr. Finch murmured at Hudson, smiling as he cradled my son in the crook of his arm. “Let’s do some differential equations, shall we?”

I returned to my seat, numb, stunned.

“Some girls are *so lucky*,” Sneer Girl said loudly as I settled back into my chair a row behind her.

“Actually, some students pay attention, go over notes, attend study groups, and I would guess review materials they don’t understand via the Internet or other local resources. I’m sure if you attempted that level of dedication, Aspen Omerich, you’d be passing the class instead of in my office crying about your grade,” Dr. Finch said as he passed Sneer Girl.

Sneer Girl, aka Aspen, gasped, her face flaming as brightly as mine had been moments before.

He put her in her place, and that felt *good*. Even vicariously. I tried to keep in a smile small, but it broke free. Dr. Finch shot me a wink as he passed.

“How’d you get on his good side?” the guy sitting next to me asked, his voice quiet.

“I have no idea,” I mumbled back.

“She pays attention,” Dr. Finch called over his shoulder. “Now, let’s get to it.”

For the next hour, Dr. Finch worked through problem after problem, holding Hudson as he wrote on the whiteboard.

At the end of class, I fought through the exiting mass of bodies to get to my baby.

Dr. Finch returned him to my arms with a slight frown. “He’s a sweet bugger.”

“Thank you,” I breathed. “You didn’t have to—”

A smile crinkled the skin around his eyes. “I know I didn’t. But you know what else I know? How hard it is to single-parent and attend class. I can tell you I never had your grades while I was doing it.”

“You have a child?” I asked.

He practically beamed love, and the emotion made his expression breathtaking. “Escher. He’s fourteen. Not as sweet as your young man, here.” His eyes continued to twinkle. “Bring him again, Ms. Dagon. I’d forgotten how invigorating an infant can be.”

I slapped my free hand over my mouth at that comment so I didn't sputter.

Dr. Finch noticed, but he simply chuckled as he shook his head. "You'll see."

There wasn't much Dr. Finch didn't observe.

## CHAPTER 2

*Jamieson*

ABBI DAGON'S child couldn't be more than five, six months, tops, but she looked like a strong wind would blow her over. I worried about her getting enough calories, especially if she was breastfeeding. I worried about Hudson getting enough to eat based on her tiny frame. He'd been so light to hold...but then I remembered the fat rolls in his arms and thighs. No, that precious boy was eating, and well, I'd say.

His mom, though...I wasn't so sure, and I didn't like that.

"Do you have help with him?" I asked, worry clouding my typically lightning-quick thoughts.

Libby shook her head, her gaze once again going to those shoes.

"What about Hudson's father?" I asked bluntly, irritated that the young man in question seemed to find it acceptable to disappear on this smart, dedicated young lady.

"Dead," she said, her voice as flat as the word that landed between us.

My anger turned inward. I'd been callous to ask, but I'd assumed...wrongly. She rocked the baby, cooing softly to him. Libby glanced up at me with big, guileless light brown eyes. She reminded me of a doe—soft and sweet and too good for

the likes of a man like me. My gaze had unerringly flitted toward her all semester.

Under my scrutiny, she tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, her cheeks flaming. She dropped her gaze to the baby, clearly too flustered to continue to hold my stare.

*Interesting.*

“Hudson’s mine because I adopted him. He’s technically my nephew, but my brother and his wife were killed in a car accident when she was thirty-four weeks along. My parents passed when I was young, and my sister-in-law’s parents didn’t want to raise a baby at their age—they’re in their seventies. So, he’s mine.”

The little darling lifted her chin and met my gaze with determination. “You were thrust into this...”

She curled over the baby and shot me a glare that had me holding up my hands. “I wouldn’t say *that*. Not at all. I *wanted* to be Hudson’s mom.” She huffed, annoyance flashing in her eyes. “I love the little guy.”

“But you had no preparation...I mean, you just got a call and...and collected a newborn?”

She blinked rapidly a few times, her lashes tangling together and partially obscuring her brown eyes. “He needed me.”

Those words hit deep inside me. He needed me.

As Escher had needed me.

In this, Libby Dagon and I were similar. And yet, her tumble into parenthood was more abrupt and traumatic than mine.

I admired Libby Dagon even more now. Before, when she was still a rather anonymous student in a sea of young adults, her sharp mind drew me. She might be unassuming, liked to fade into the background, but in this moment, her sweet face had settled with determination, her jaw thrust forward with a pugnaciousness I couldn't help but admire.

Freckles dotted her nose, while the rest of her skin was a smooth cream. Her white-blonde hair was tied back in a messy ponytail, and dark rings circled her brown doe-like eyes.

*Of course* she was tired. She was taking one of the most challenging math classes ever devised while caring for a newborn and grieving her family.

This woman had a will forged by the forges of hell. I...felt too much and liked what I felt for her more.

“Like I told you, it's not a problem if you need to bring him again,” I said, my tone gruff, forcing distance between us. “He did great up here. I think he likes the limelight.”

I offered her a small grin in an effort to show her I meant what I said. Her pupils blazed wide in response, and her face flamed. She ducked her head.

“Thank you.” She turned away, clearly embarrassed by her response.

“And Libby?” I called.

Once she glanced at me over her shoulder, I said, “I enjoyed getting to know you both.”

Her breath hitched, and her eyes spoke the volumes she tried to hide when she turned her head.

I smirked, a warm glow settling low in my belly as I leaned against the whiteboard, enjoying watching the lovely



Libby collect her things. She shot me a surreptitious look, but I didn't bother to hide my interest.

I hadn't felt desire of this magnitude...let alone the need to *romance* a woman in years. I'd forgotten how *exhilarating* it was.

Sure, Libby Dagon was my student, and nothing physical or romantic could happen between us until after she completed my course in three weeks, but that didn't mean I wouldn't pursue the sweet little doe after...

Because I would.

In fact, now the anticipation would be sweet as I ticked down the days.

## CHAPTER 3

*Libby*

“SO, what do you think I should wear?” I asked Hudson two weeks later.

My son settled in his playpen that I’d shoehorned into the corner of my bedroom and blew bubbles. He was clearly delighted with his spit and toes and not at all interested in my clothing options—or that I wanted to impress Jamieson Finch.

*Jamieson.*

The name whispered through my mind as I shivered. I reveled in thinking of Dr. Finch by his first name. I enjoyed thinking about Dr. Finch. Period.

I’d been daydreaming about the gorgeous math professor more often...and I’d been thinking about him plenty before he held Hudson. Last week, April had been well enough to watch him, but tonight she’d scheduled a date with a cute teacher’s assistant in the philosophy department. The guy was a year younger than me and reminded me of a string bean with a dark puff of hair.

Nothing like Jamieson Finch.

“Well, I guess these are the right pants because we’re out of time.”

I bent down and picked up Hudson with a grunt. “We may need to lay off those bananas, big guy. My arms aren’t strong enough to keep up with your growing self.”

I buckled him into his carrier, then tickled his tummy before grasping my backpack and slinging it over my shoulder. I’d already double-checked that I had my laptop and other materials I needed for this class.

It was my only course this semester—the last one I needed for my master’s in theoretical mathematics and derivatives. Thanks to my brother’s life insurance policy, I had some breathing room to pick the best position after I graduated. I planned to take my time with my job search to ensure the company I chose to work for would offer Hudson quality daycare and me some flexibility in my schedule so that I didn’t miss too many of Hudson’s firsts.

I locked my apartment. I traipsed down the hall where a few wreaths and lights were hung around doors, which had begun to appear after Thanksgiving. I enjoyed the various lawn decorations that had popped up on the small, tidy homes near the university as I walked the quarter mile to the lecture hall, but by the time I was two-thirds of the way there, I was hot, a little sweaty, and puffing.

“Seriously, I need to get in better shape,” I muttered.

“What you need is a stroller or one of those baby wraps so that your arms are free.”

I squeaked at the voice until I realized Dr. Finch had settled into stride next to me. He waved at Hudson’s carrier. “May I?”

“Um...”

He cast me a side-eye that had me almost swooning because the man's eyelashes were *fabulous*. "Before you tell me I don't have to, I'm offering because I'd like to see my little friend again."

I handed over the carrier with a grunt. I shook my arms as Jamieson...*Dr. Finch*...settled Hudson's car seat in the crook of his elbow.

"It *is* heavy. Yes, you definitely need a stroller."

"I don't take Hudson out that often." I blushed, wondering what this accomplished man must think of my comment.

"Because of the accident?" he asked, expression serious.

"Yes," I said. "I've been too afraid to put him in a car. He's young, but that kind of trauma..." I swallowed. "He deserves to be healthy. Happy."

"Hey." He stopped walking and faced me, ignoring the students sending us covert glances. "Look at me, Libby."

I sucked in a breath and met his gaze. "You're brave. Each time you get in a car, you must relive one of the worst experiences of your life."

My throat closed, but not from the fear I normally felt. This was emotion. He leaned in, almost as if he wanted to comfort me. Instead, he studied my face.

"Ready for your last class before the break?"

"Yes, sure, but I don't know what I'm going to do with myself once the semester ends."

"Why's that?" he asked.

"Because I'll have six glorious weeks in my apartment with my baby before I need to pack up and move." Where, I

still wasn't sure, but I didn't want to stay in this part of the country. Now that I was so close to finishing my degree, I wanted to move away from the memories of loss. Plus, I wanted more seasons. I'd put on a coat, but I could have gotten by with just a sweater. Dr. Finch wore a sports coat over his dress shirt and was plenty warm enough.

Definitely seasons—with *actual* snow.

Jamies—*Dr. Finch* pushed open the door to the building for me, and I scooted past him.

“You don't have plans for the holiday?” he asked.

“With a five-month-old?” I shook my head. “Hudson and I are going low-key for his first holiday. Lots of drinking milk and chilling in our jammies.”

Whatever he planned to say dissipated when Sneer Girl shrieked his name. With fascination, I watched his expression slide into neutrality. Huh. Who knew so much was going on behind his stoic mask?

He shot me an apologetic look as he pushed into the lecture hall.

## CHAPTER 4

*Jamieson*

SO MUCH FOR enjoying a few stolen moments with my shy doe. Though I doubted Libby Dagon was actually as quiet as or spooked as easily as a deer. She shot Aspen Omerich a look filled with fire before she took her normal seat. I settled Hudson's carrier next to my podium as I waited for Ms. Omerich to ask her question.

"Oh, he's so cute," Ms. Omerich gushed. "I can see why you like him coming to class. Who wouldn't want baby snuggles?"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes as I turned away, deliberately using my body to block Ms. Omerich's attempts to touch Hudson. If she thought she could use Libby's baby to get in my good graces, she was gravely mistaken.

But then there was much this particular young woman wouldn't grasp—not least of which was the coursework. I still didn't understand *why* she was in my course. Well, I did. Ms. Omerich wasn't in my class for learning; she was there in hopes of scoring something besides a good grade, which she'd told me the second time she'd propositioned me during my office hours.

"I was wondering if you'd have time after class for some extra...tutoring," she asked, biting her lip.

“As you know, I have office hours for questions,” I said, “but they’re all full, so, unfortunately, you’ll have to make do with Peter or the Internet.”

She pouted as she leaned closer. “Your TA isn’t as good at explaining the material as you are.”

I bit back my remark about her current fling with Peter and the fact that I was, ultimately, the one who graded her assignments, not my teacher’s assistant.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d take your seat so that others can learn.”

She missed the dig about her abilities, and I sighed, all too thankfully, when she settled into her seat. Never before had I been so glad to know the end of a semester loomed near. I hadn’t fit in at this institution, and I longed to go back home. Escher had considered this trip an adventure, and it was. But this detour to the South made me crave Pennsylvania’s crisp fall air.

Soon, we’d return.

I picked up Hudson, who snuggled into my chest, his tiny, pudgy cheek pressed into the lapel of my sports coat. I smiled, enjoying his slight weight and puffs of breath.

I turned toward the lecture hall, all business.

“Let’s begin.”

## CHAPTER 5

*Libby*

“NOT GOING TO LIE, my ovaries are working overdrive,” a girl in the row behind me said as she packed up her gear.

“Why is it *so hot* to see a man with a baby?” her friend asked.

That was the question. And I didn’t have a suitable answer. I stood, waiting for more students to pass so that I could get to Hudson.

“Hey, thanks for bringing the baby,” the girl from the row behind me said, a large smile breaking across her face. “I never knew I wanted that before this class.” She pointed toward Jamieson...Dr. Finch, who was still holding Hudson in the crook of his arm, swaying absently as a student asked him a question.

“Neither did I,” I murmured.

“What?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry I had to disrupt class—”

“Don’t be,” her friend said. “And good luck on the final. Though I guess you won’t really need it.”

I snorted. “We’ll *all* need help. The midterm was a beast.”



The girls looked at each other, then back at me. “Want to study together? We can come to your place. I mean, if you’re willing—”

“That would be great,” I said, smiling. “Give me your numbers, and we’ll work out a few times.”

---

“You seem in a better mood,” Dr. Finch said once I made it down the steps. He rubbed his cheek against Hudson’s head, an endearing gesture, before handing my son back to me.

“Yeah. The review was great, and I’m going to study with a few of the other students.” I grinned. “As you know, it’s easier to bounce ideas and such off others than to work it all out yourself.”

He raised an eyebrow. “If you say so.”

His demeanor was cool, detached. Unlike his kindness earlier tonight. I faltered, unsure what I’d done to make him so with me.

“I have somewhere to be,” he said, rather pointedly.

“Right. Sure.” I took Hudson from him and bent down, getting the sleepy little dude into his carrier. By the time I had him buckled in, Dr. Finch had packed up his bag and left.

I stood, blinking back the inexplicable tears, and started toward my typical exit at the top of the lecture hall. A few students remained, still chatting. One guy hurried forward and opened the door for me.

“I heard you’re doing a study session for the final,” he said.

“Um...”

“Think I could get in on that action? I definitely need some help with derivatives.”

“Sure.” I rattled off my number and the tentative day and time the girls. Hudson made a small cry. “I need to get him home.”

The guy nodded. “Mind if I tell my buddies?”

That’s how I ended up with seventeen grad students in my apartment with pizza boxes, soda and beer cans, pencils, papers, and eraser bits all over my living room for the next six days.

Yes, each day, *all* seventeen of the students showed up, including Sneer Girl and her mean friend.

I’d never been so relieved to complete a final.

“Where’s the little guy?” Enrique, the guy who’d held the door for me and invited all our classmates to my place, asked as we walked outside after the exam. My arms and legs shook—an adrenaline reaction, no doubt. I’d just finished my education. No matter what happened, I’d graduate in a week with a master’s degree.

“At home with my roommate.”

“Ah. Want to grab some coffee?”

I shook my head, trying to ignore his eager expression. “Thanks for the offer, but I need to get back to my son. Have a joyous holiday.”

His shoulders slumped. “Yeah. You, too.”

I watched him hurry to catch up to sneer girl and her friend. All three of them laughed about something, and then

they were going around the building's corner. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Let the holidays begin.”

---

My family was vaguely Jewish, meaning that we'd celebrated the major religious holidays. Wanting to pass along those traditions to Hudson, I stopped by the large department store the next day to get the appropriate supplies for Hannukah. After considering Jamieson's—no, Dr. Finch's—suggestion, I purchased a stroller, too, which made getting around much easier.

I'd unpacked my mother's menorah after my final. We'd light the first candle from the bag stored in the stroller's basket tonight.

“We're going to party it up,” I told Hudson as I pushed him toward our door.

“You are? With whom?” Dr. Finch asked from where he leaned against the wall.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, gaping like a fish.

“I wanted to see you now that I've turned in my grades for your class. You were one of two A's. Now that you're no longer a student, I wanted to ask you and Hudson to join Escher and me for dinner.”

I just stared, wide-eyed, my mind blank. Jamieson... definitely Jamieson, fidgeted a little at my silence. He cleared his throat.

“Unless, of course, you're too busy partying. With Enrique Munsen, perhaps?”

My mind still struggled to catch up to this new data Jamieson had just added to my life. Dinner? With his son? Did Jamieson think I was dating Enrique? My nose scrunched at the thought.

“N-no. Enrique’s a friend, but we’re not...I’m not...I have a *baby!*”

“Who looks adorable in his bear outfit. Clothing has come a long way since Escher was an infant.” Dr. Finch peered up at me, a slight smile on his face. “Do you have dinner plans?”

“I...no...but I couldn’t possibly intrude...”

“I invited, so it’s not an intrusion.”

I sucked in a breath, trying to wrap my mind around this turn of events. “Dr. Finch—”

“Jamieson.” Oh how I loved the sound of his name. Loved it so much I wanted to roll around on my bed saying it over and over...

At my choked sound, Jamieson stepped in closer, and I inhaled his aftershave. Woodsy. Clean. Masculine. My thighs clenched.

Something wasn’t right. “But you...the other day...after class...”

He rubbed the back of his neck and peered at me through those thick-framed spectacles I found unbearably sexy. “I couldn’t be seen having favorites, could I? Plus, I wanted to catch the end of my son’s soccer match.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s makes sense.”

I frowned but made no move to head into my apartment. He’d sought me out. Asked me to join him for dinner. My heart pattered in my chest as a blush warmed my cheeks. I

knew I was too quiet, too willing to fade into the background to ever be considered stunning. Normally, I liked it there, but knowing that Jamieson Finch saw me and wanted to know me...I was so flattered.

“I love how you look at me, Libby,” he murmured. He raised his fingertips to run them along my jaw. “Adore it, actually. I’m pretty sure when you say my name, I’m going to struggle to control my need to kiss you.”

I licked my lower lip and tightened my hands on the stroller’s bar. “Jamieson...”

He moaned softly as he bent nearer. “Just as good as I knew it would be. Better because of the breathiness. You are a *delicious* treat, Libby. One that made this trip south most worth it.”

He tipped my chin up and brushed his lips against mine. His were warm, supple, but mine felt cold, a little chapped. I gasped at the electricity that shot through my chest to my core.

“Open for me, little doe. Let me in to taste you.”

*Doe?* Is that how he saw me? Should I be offended? His lips closed the distance between us, the softness of his skin sliding, fitting, connecting us.

I kept one hand on the stroller as I moved the other to his jaw, fingers splayed wide as I did as he asked. He used his free hand to clasp my hip, tugging me tighter toward him. When his tongue touched mine, my knees went liquid, but he was already gathering me closer, pressing me to the firm wall of his chest, bracing his thighs on either side of mine. He *devoured* me. There was no other way to describe how he consumed my moans and sighs as he sucked, nibbled, licked, and loved my mouth.

I never wanted that kiss to end. Every nerve ending was aflame, my whole body trembling with need, and my panties turned slick. I moved, restless, needing more against my pebbled nipples and a way to relieve the thrum of desire that had blossomed between my thighs.

The sensation was almost foreign—I'd been so wrapped up in Hudson, in grief, that I'd forgotten me, my body's needs.

He pulled his lips from mine, causing me to gasp in dismay as I tried to follow him. He chuckled, a dark, rich sound that flowed over my nerves, soothing and arousing them at the same time.

“That was so much better than my fantasies,” he murmured as he tucked some of my hair behind my ear.

My lids fluttered open, and I swallowed, shocked by my behavior, frustrated with the need coursing through me.

“I need to go,” I whispered.

He nuzzled into my temple. “If you're feeling as I am, you need to *come*.”

I did. So badly. His words made the desire burn brighter.

“I'm not sure what to say.” Or what to do. For months, Hudson dominated my waking hours. My sleeping ones, too. There'd been no time for a relationship, especially when my boyfriend dumped me as soon as he realized I planned to adopt Hudson. He'd told me he wasn't ready for the commitment of a family, and while I was fun in and out of bed, he wasn't looking for more.

I'd been too busy grieving for my family to consider his words, but now they'd stung.

Not as terribly as they might since Jamieson Finch was still holding me, and his taste clung to my tongue. But enough for me to know I needed to deal with those emotions before I jumped into something with my professor.

Not just *any* professor. Jamieson Finch was one of the most celebrated in my field.

That dumped a bucket of reality on my head. I shuffled back, away from the man who'd starred in every dirty fantasy I'd had these past few months.

"I'm *your student*."

He shook his head, his lips kicked up a little. They were plumper, softer than I'd ever seen them. Because of my kisses? A hot flush of pride and lust slammed into me. I wanted him. Badly. With a deep aching emptiness that I wasn't sure he'd ever be able to fill.

"No, Libby, you're not. And I never want you to be anything other than my colleague, my partner, again."

My mind spun with his words.

"Let me in, Libby. *Please*, let me in." He pressed his thumb to my lips, seeking entrance, but his words, they were the words of a man desperate to be loved.

## CHAPTER 6

*Jamieson*

HER EYES WERE TOO intense for the soft, sherry-brown, and with each passing breath, I sank deeper into them. I wanted her mind, her body, but I wanted her heart even more.

That made no sense. Until a few weeks ago, her mind had impressed me—seduced by her logic and her precise handwriting.

Holding Hudson during those classes, meeting her gaze when she told me about her brother, about her fears, I felt something deep, primal—*important*—snap into place.

She was young, quite probably too young for me. I was forty, and she was in her mid-twenties. But she knew loss; she knew grief; she knew raising a child alone.

These terrible burdens and great joys were shared.

Libby also knew the comforts of the logic of mathematics. She saw its poetry, the beauty that it wrought in the world.

We had so much in common.

Her lips parted, and her tongue caressed the pad of my thumb. I groaned. She moaned.

Hudson snuffled.



“Come to my house,” I whispered. “Meet Escher. Let him fall in love with Hudson.”

*Let him fall in love with you, like I am.*

She pulled back, her gaze unwavering. How her classmates or other professors overlooked Libby Dagon was beyond me. Her strength was in her silence. She never backed away as she asked, “You want me because I’m a package deal with Hudson? You’re in love with him, so you’ll accept me, too?”

Her breath puffed on my drying skin, sending a shiver straight to my toes.

“No.” I crowded just enough closer for her to feel the evidence of my desire for her against the soft give of her belly. Even through her coat and mine, my pants, underwear, and her sweater, possibly a shirt, she now knew my shaft thumped with a soft pulse of its own.

“I want you because you’re brilliant, Libby. Your mind flows without restraint, and that is sexy. Such a turn-on, but... look at you,” I breathed.

I moved my thumb to trace the curve of her cheek, the sweep of her eyebrow, the softness of her long bangs she’d barely tucked behind her ear. I caressed the soft skin there, then down to her lips once more.

“It’s been tortuous to see you in my class, to keep a proper distance between us—to just be your professor when I wanted so much more.” As I said the words, the truth settled over me. “You are a bright star, my beacon. And I want to see what we are, where we can go.”

She swallowed, her eyes—those beautiful eyes—darkening with disappointment. “You gave me an A because you want to seduce me.”

“You earned your grade. I’d never insult either of us by cheating you of your work. I’m asking, now, as a man to earn a chance to be with you. I’d love to seduce you. Nothing is going to be as luscious as your body, quivering and naked, against mine as I drive us both to pleasure.”

Her eyes widened more, her lips parting again as she panted softly.

“You want that, too, Libby. Why are you fighting this—me?”

“Because...”

Hudson squeaked again, a higher, angrier sound.

“Because?” I prompted. She was slipping from me, her mind churning, her eyes dimming.

“Because everyone I love leaves me.”

Hudson woke with a cry. She gripped his stroller tightly, offering me her back. She fumbled with her keys but opened her door.

“I’m sorry, Jamieson. You’re my dream—a fantasy I’m afraid to reach for. If I lose that...”

She pushed the stroller into the apartment. She shut it softly with a click. I waited, and as I’d known she would, she murmured against the wood separating us. “I lose all hope.”

## CHAPTER 7

*Libby*

I CRIED WITH HUDSON. Freshly diapered, I fed him, walking him through the apartment that was now mine. Laurel had moved out the day before—right after her last final. She'd wanted to spend the holidays with her family before she started her position in Lexington.

The place felt cavernous, echoing with my noises because we no longer had the rug in the living room or Laurel's ancient side chair I'd preferred over my couch.

I sighed as I tipped my face toward the window, the grayness of the weather suiting my mood. My tears had dried, as had Hudson's now that he greedily sucked at his bottle.

"You're all I need, little man," I said.

But my words rang hollow. He could leave me. He *should* leave me at some point. I would be alone then, and I'd only have myself to blame. Jamieson Finch had offered himself to me.

He wanted me. He wanted me to meet his son.

Those actions were not his *modus operandi*. Jamieson Finch was cold, a wizard with functions and equations but not known for his interpersonal skills. If the rumors were true, each semester, a few female students tried to seduce him. I'd

heard he was particularly careful with any woman because the mere hint of impropriety could cost him his reputation. I couldn't blame him for wanting to stay away from potential lawsuits and campus inquiries.

What he'd shown me, that vulnerability, was even more impressive because of his history. And I'd flung his emotions back in his face, shut the door before I'd even really considered his offer.

"I'm afraid," I said. Hudson stared up at me, his eyes still the blue of babyhood but muddying quickly. They'd be brown soon—possibly hazel, like my brother's.

"I lost so many people in such a short time. My life changed after my parents' death, then again after your parents'. I don't know how to not be afraid that life will change again, that I'll lose more people. But that's not logical—that's emotional. A fear I don't want to pass along to you, sweet boy. How can I be brave when the mere idea of allowing someone else into my heart makes my heart pound? It's been so tattered. Do I even have one left?"

I did. I wouldn't feel this way if I didn't.

"What should I do? How do I figure this out?"

Unlike a mathematical equation, I couldn't solve *this* problem with logic. I would have to be honest. Vulnerable.

Was there anything worse than opening myself up to more hurt?

Hudson pushed away the bottle and smiled, bright and big and enough to take my breath away. I never tired of his smiles, which lit up his entire face and seemed to start with his enormous eyes.

"You're right, sweetie. You just do it."

Hudson added a coo and a giggle to his next smile, and I cuddled him closer.

## CHAPTER 8

*Jamieson*

GRADUATION DAY LOST its special luster when I went to the ceremony three times a year, every year. I situated my robes and tassels and other paraphernalia required so that the parents and students attending today would know I was learned and distinguished. I rolled my eyes and sighed, turning from the reflection.

“I think you look pretty good,” Escher said from where he sat, cross-legged, on my bed. My lonely bed. Until Libby, I had thought little about my lack of romance. Raising Escher, trying to untangle difficult equations, guest lectures, and travel took up my time. They wallpapered over the lonely reality that my son was growing up—already as tall as I was—and growing away from me.

“Thanks, but I’d much rather spend the afternoon at your game than at the graduation.” Not exactly true, as I felt a burst of pride in Libby Dagon’s accomplishments.

“Just another match,” Escher said as he rose. He wore his uniform but bent over to slide his feet into his cleats. “I’ll have Jake’s mom send you a video.”

I settled my hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “Thanks, Esch.”

“She’s single, you know.”

No, I didn’t. “Who?”

“Jake’s mom. And she bakes cookies from scratch. She likes to sing while she cooks dinner, and she’s smart—some kind of marketing executive.”

“Iris is a lovely woman,” I agreed. She was, but she wasn’t for me. I found her laugh a little too loud, her bottle-blond hair a bit too brash. She liked to be noticed, for her athletic figure was always wrapped in Lulu Lemon, or whatever the newest, hottest brand was.

She was also kind, a patient and loving mother, and someone I’d briefly considered getting involved with. *Briefly*.

“But not for you,” Escher said, shoulders slumping. He shot me a look I found difficult to decipher. I was receiving more of those. “Jake’s house smells wonderful. He’s always got healthy food in the fridge, clean clothes, fresh towels.”

“Iris isn’t a hotel service provider,” I said, raising my eyebrow. “Most of those things you can do for yourself.”

“I know, but it’s nice to know someone else *wants* to do it for me. At least, I think it would be. Jake says his mom’s a pain in the ass.”

I settled on the edge of my bed, staring up at my son. I sucked in my lower lip as the puzzle pieces clicked into place. “You miss her. Your mom.”

Escher shrugged. “How can I? She died when I was born.”

I swallowed back the grief that hit whenever I remembered Leila’s machines flatlining. I’d been ushered out of the hospital room, confused and scared, still holding Escher because I’d just cut his umbilical cord.

When a nurse tried to take him, I'd been unable to hand him over, too afraid I'd lose him, too.

"She loved you. So much." I swallowed the lump and cleared it from my throat.

Escher smiled. "I know. You've told me. Showed me the pictures."

"I don't want you to think anyone would ever replace her," I said.

Escher snorted. "There'd have to be someone in your life to make *that* happen." He had Leila's eyes—a soft blue with a green outer ring. I'd loved staring into Leila's eyes. Escher's were different from his mother's—fiercer, more curious.

"We're not staying here. You know that. I thought you wanted to go home, see your friends."

"I do. I miss Philadelphia. I miss my friends, but...it'd be nice to have a holiday with more than the two of us," he went on. "Jake's mom would have us over. You don't have to like her *that* way, but we could...we could be like a normal family...you know?"

His eyes pleaded. This was important to him. A horn bleated. Escher sighed even as he trotted toward the door. "Gotta go. That's Jake's mom."

"I met someone," I blurted. "Libby. She's...special."

Escher looked back over his shoulder, a grin splitting his face. "When do I get to meet her?"

An answering smile bloomed across my face. "As soon as I talk her into it."

"Awesome. Can't wait!"



“Me either,” I said.

My son’s laugh echoed back down the hall, and I rose from the bed, determined to break through Libby’s thick, high, emotional walls.

## CHAPTER 9

*Libby*

HUDSON SAT IN MY LAP, his tiny hands gasping at the shiny satin material of my hood, showing my Summa cum Laude status. I'd done it—I'd graduated with a master's degree from a top university.

“Want me to hold the kid while you get your diploma?” Enrique asked in a soft voice from the chair to my left.

I shook my head. “Hudson's coming with me.” He was part of my journey.

Enrique shrugged, but I could tell he didn't understand. Few people would. I caught Jamieson's eye where he sat on the stage to the side of the speaker, who was concluding her remarks.

In a moment, I'd cross the stage and shake his hand. The hand that had held me with such surety...that I wanted all over me, learning me...loving me.

As I'd realized in the days since I shut him out, I, more than anyone, should know the importance of connection. I, more than anyone, should celebrate it, lean into it. Cherish it.

I planned to as soon as I accepted my diploma.

The university president stepped back toward the lectern and began calling names.

I crossed the stage with Hudson on my hip, my head high. I smiled at Jamieson as I accepted my diploma. He smiled back, and it lit up those beautiful eyes. *Later*, he mouthed toward me.

I nodded, feeling that flutter of awareness again in my lower belly.

Sneer Girl was one of the last to get her diploma. Instead of accepting from the president as the rest of us did, she leaned in and said something to the man. He turned to look at Jamieson, who stood next in line.

Sneer Girl said something else and gestured. The president scowled and nodded. Sneer Girl grabbed her diploma and strode past Jamieson in an intentional snub.

The president smiled, though his teeth remained gritted, and he completed the ceremony.

Sneer Girl leaned forward from her chair behind me. “He’s going down,” she said.

Enrique turned, shifted in his seat, his expression shocked. “What did you do?”

Sneer Girl laughed. “I told the president that Dr. Finch likes sexual favors. That grades are based on whether students perform *that* exam well.”

My eyes widened, and my stomach churned at her innuendo. She planned to ruin Jamieson’s career because he’d called her out in class, shaming her.

“I must give magnificent head,” Enrique muttered. “Because I received an A-minus in the class. Had nothing to do with all the work I put into the course or the study groups Libby offered.”

Around us, other students shifted and grumbled, but I sat in stunned silence. Sneer Girl was correct—her accusation could destroy Jamieson’s career.

Hudson gurgled as he shoved the satin into his mouth. Sneer Girl had taken this victory from me. I glanced back at her self-satisfied smirk. It was as much to destroy my moment as it was to hurt Jamieson’s career.

I couldn’t grasp that level of pettiness.

Enrique bounced out of his seat and looked at the rest of us. “Well, come on. We have to set this shit straight before it impacts Dr. Finch’s position.”

“Oh, it’s definitely impacted,” Sneer Girl said with a smirk. “I have a lawyer suing the school.”

“You really are a stupid, stupid woman,” Enrique muttered. “Jose? Laura? Jules? Y’all coming to vouch for Dr. Finch?”

“Absolutely,” Jules said. Sneer Girl’s smirk faltered as fourteen other students—the ones who’d been at my house most of last week—rose and began to walk toward the stage.

Enrique glanced back at me. “Libby?”

I held Hudson closer, trying to calculate if me saying something would help or hinder. I glanced up on the stage to see the president hissing in Jamieson’s ear. He glanced down at us, his gaze skimming to Sneer Girl, landing, eyes narrowing, before they came back to rest on me.

He gave me a smile that said: *trust me*. I wanted to. No, I *needed* to. So, I pushed past Enrique and led the other students forward.

“...to my office,” Jamieson said to the president and the other faculty who’d gathered around him. “I can clear this up.”

“How do you plan to do that?” the president asked, clearly flustered. “She said she has proof.”

“As in a video of each student interaction? Because that’s what I catalog.”

“Why would you do such a thing?” another administrator asked.

Jamieson spread out his hands and encompassed the group of us standing at the edge of the stage. “For this very reason.”

“It’s in his syllabus,” Enrique called up to the university brass. “At the bottom of the page. There’s an asterisk and a footnote that says you will be videoed during every lecture and every time you go to office hours.”

I’d read that, too. I thought he’d meant in the lecture hall, but Jamieson had been more prepared for this type of accusation than most professors, which set off a whole new set of concerns cascading through my mind.

Because he needed to be?

## CHAPTER 10

*Jamieson*

LIBBY'S determined expression eased some of my worries, but a sick weight remained in my belly. I wanted this ridiculous charade over. I wanted to hold Hudson and Libby in my arms.

Instead, a group of us—at least thirty now—tromped from the ceremony site across campus toward my office. I wanted to glance back at Libby, but now wasn't the time to express my interest in a student.

*Definitely* not now.

Thank goodness I'd never been interested in one before Libby.

Still, her quiet presence bolstered me against the unfair charges.

Aspen's accusation forced me to prove my innocence. I hated that one person's viciousness had such a potential impact on a career. The administration had doubts in their eyes. The worry about lawsuits. But the students at my back were my supporters. Enrique's voice lifted over the rest, his comment of "Dr. Finch would never take advantage of a student," warming my chest. He was a good young man, better than I'd given him credit for when I saw him as a rival for Libby's affections.

The grounds were pristine, the buildings well-maintained. I hadn't loved the school before Aspen Omerich's accusations, and I wanted nothing more than to leave immediately, regardless of the offer of employment on my desk even now. Why would I want to remain here, after my colleagues so readily believed Aspen Omerich's accusations?

I hadn't wanted to stay before this drama, but turning down the tenure-track position was a worry for another day. Now, I needed to prove my innocence. My fists clenched and unclenched. Prove my innocence. For doing my job. That sick weight grew.

We arrived at the building, and I stomped up the stairs. I pulled out my keys and opened my office. I ushered in the president, provost, and a few other senior officials. The students crowded around the door, Libby at the back, clutching Hudson to her chest. She offered me a smile, her eyes filled with fire. I stood there for a moment, soaking her in, needing her belief to buoy me through this nightmare.

She touched her thumb to her lip, as I'd done when we were outside her apartment. Her eyes smoldered as she let the tip slide inside. Heat curled through my belly, stripping away some of the greasy illness that slushed there.

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I showed the cadre of personnel the cameras, shocked they'd been useful. *Hating* that they were. Escher had been the one to suggest them. He'd worried over me as a "cool single dude"—his words.

"I've heard how the women talk about you, Dad. You need to be prepared."

That my then twelve-year-old son understood the current climate of sexuality better than me was deeply unsettling even as I now found comfort in his suggestion.

“I keep a file of every student interaction.” Again, Escher’s idea, which I’d implemented with some level of skepticism. I was going to have to thank my son for his intelligence. “I don’t know exactly when Ms. Omerich visited my offices, but I know it was twice.”

I played footage, starting at the beginning of the semester. While tedious, I found the correct ones relatively quickly.

I stepped back as the interaction unfolded, wincing at Ms. Omerich’s clumsy attempts to seduce me hit my ears again.

I backed away from the computer, trying to catch Libby’s gaze. She was sitting in a chair in the hallway, feeding Hudson a bottle. I’d wanted that time with her today. I’d wanted to make her dinner, settle Hudson in my lap, and wrap my arm around her shoulder as she drank part of the excellent wine I’d hoped she’d share with me tonight.

“You said she visited your office hours twice,” the president said, pulling my attention back to the seriousness of the situation. “Show us the other interaction.” His tone was imperious, his request grating.

Libby shifted so that I could see her face. She offered me a smile, which I returned, but it felt...off. Like something important had snapped inside me.

I’d been careful with my students, always remaining ethical and precise. Until Libby. With her, I hadn’t been able to control my attraction—hadn’t wanted to. So, maybe I deserved to be accused of moral crimes. Worry and self-loathing crashed through me as I realized I hadn’t asked Libby what



she wanted that day outside her apartment; I'd told her what *I* wanted.

My behavior with Libby hadn't been acceptable, even if Libby felt the pull between us. I was sure she had—possibly still did. But that didn't give me a right to push my agenda, my desires onto her.

I struggled with the implications of all the thoughts, all the worries coursing through my mind.

I inhaled as I turned away. Maybe it was for the best that nothing more serious than a few kisses had happened between us.

Now, with each breath I took, with each flash of video I'd felt compelled to record, everything about my interactions with this university, the students, felt sordid. Sullied.

I was glad to be leaving this place, thankful my sabbatical was over.

The second of the two videos played, and I cringed at Ms. Omerich's bolder attempts at seduction. They made my stomach churn, and my breath catch. I heard my clipped response, but I felt like I was underwater.

"I've seen enough. Send those to me, and I'll deal with the student," the president said. He clapped my shoulder. "Can't be too careful these days. You were smart to have this here."

"That girl had piss-poor behavior," another administrator said with a vapid smile, unable to meet my gaze. "You came much too highly regarded to degrade yourself so."

Moments before, the woman had clearly thought I'd forced sex with a student. Forced my will on another person. Nausea engulfed me, and I bolted from the room and barely made it to a trash can before I emptied my stomach.

God. *God*. As if I'd ever use my position to force a student into sex. I was a teacher; I shared my knowledge and love of mathematics, not my body.

I shook and heaved. Cool fingers touched my neck, soothing me. Libby.

My tightly sealed eyes eased a little as I leaned into her touch. I needed that touch, *her*, to calm the horrors of this day. I never thought I'd need those videos. *Never*. They'd been a mental exercise, really.

Yet, here I was, showing them mere months later. I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose. Libby continued to caress me. Her touch calmed me.

I *needed* her. I couldn't quite explain it, just that I did—almost as much as I needed to leave this wretched place. I wanted to go home. Escher did, too.

“There's one more thing you should know,” Libby said.

“Not another scandal,” the president bemoaned.

“No scandal. Just that Dr. Finch was kind to me this semester. He held my son when I had to bring him to class. We've gotten to know each other over the last few weeks, and, now that I've graduated, I hope to pursue a relationship with him.”

I settled my butt on the floor, leaning my back against the wall. I stared up at her. She was still my little doe, quiet and small, but she had an inner strength I'd noted when she told me about her brother, about becoming Hudson's mom.

“Aspen knew I was attracted to Dr. Finch; I'm not great at hiding my feelings. She used Dr. Finch's kindness and my crush as a reason to make her accusations. I wanted it on

record that he was professional at every interaction we had on campus.”

“Good to know,” the administrator simpered.

I think I hated her as much as Ms. Omerich.

“To reiterate, I intend to pursue a relationship with Dr. Finch, if he’s interested, that is. Just to be clear,” Libby said.

“That’s no concern of ours, young lady,” the president said.

I took Libby’s hand between mine and squeezed her fingers.

I was low...lower than I’d *ever* been professionally. Students would talk about this moment, but I couldn’t stop that. All I could do was be thankful Libby was here, at my side. She settled next to me, her hip touching mine. I took Hudson from her, glad for his slight, reassuring weight in my arms. I needed to rinse out my mouth. I needed to send those files.

She brushed the hair back from my forehead as she studied my face. “I’m falling in love with you.”

She was beautiful, and I’d remember this moment on such a monumentally terrible day forever. “I’m already in love with you,” I said.

She rested her head on my shoulder, and I wound my free arm around her.

Enrique grinned at us. “You two are adorable.” He scrunched his nose and his shoulders. “Aspen’s gonna get it and you gonna get some, Libby.” He chuckled. “*Man*, I love happy endings.”

## CHAPTER 11

*Libby*

AFTER OUR FIRST date on the floor outside his office with the various university officials side-eying us, I wasn't as concerned about meeting Jamieson's son...until we pulled up in front of Jamieson's rented house, with its large wreath and lights wrapped around the porch pillars. It was lovely, homey—reminded me of my parents' house. A boy appeared in the doorway. That would be Escher, Jamieson's son.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my wool skirt and looked back hopefully, at Hudson, who was asleep in the back seat.

Jamieson had driven slowly, with care, and we'd made it to his house with no stress. Well, no more anxiety than traveling by car *and* meeting my newly-minted boyfriend's son would create.

“Dad! We won! We're going to—who's with you?” Escher peered into the car, squinting against the tint of the windows.

I shoved open the door, careful not to smack the boy...who was half a foot taller than me.

“Hello,” I said. “I'm Libby—”

“Dad told me he liked you. I can see why. You're pretty.” Escher's face might have been redder than mine. *Might*. I wasn't sure.

“Thanks,” I said. “You’re, um, really tall. So...you play a sport?”

“Soccer.” He continued to stare at me. “We’re going to the championship.”

“Great job.” Jamieson wrapped his arm around Escher and pressed a kiss against the boy’s damp hair.

“Thanks. So, you’re the lady Dad likes?”

I flashed my eyes up toward Jamieson, who offered me a smile. “And, come to find out, Libby likes me back. She told me and the entire university staff we’re together today.”

“That’s epic.” Escher seemed to regain his bearings.

“Out of control,” I said with a small grin. “I’m not normally so forward, but today was...interesting.”

At Escher’s questioning look, Jamieson ruffled his hair. “I’ll tell you all about it. As soon as we bring Hudson inside.”

Escher’s eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. “A baby? You come with *a baby*? A boy? This is *totally* sick! I always wanted a brother. Can I hold him? How old is he? Can he crawl? When will he walk? Dad, we need to get him a soccer ball so he can play with me.”

Jamieson chuckled as he lifted Hudson’s carrier from the middle of the seat.

“Escher likes kids—always wanted a brother. Seriously, he’s been begging since he could talk.” Jamieson winked, and my chest nearly exploded.

It was as if this man and his son were made for me, and Hudson and I for him.

When I met his gaze, I could see a future. A full one that incorporated lots of love and too many soccer games and bear hugs and laughter. So much joy and laughter.

I hadn't realized how much I'd missed out on in the past year, but as Escher grabbed my hand and led me into the house, I realized I would *never* miss happiness again.

These Finch men wouldn't allow it.

## *Epilogue*

### **Jamieson**

I WINCED at the second crash as I hurried down the stairs. I'd been in my office, grading papers, but clearly, Hudson had gotten into mischief.

“I fix it, Daddy!”

“Fix what, buddy?” I asked, making my way into the living room where our fresh Noble fir lay on its side, a growing puddle of water spilling across the hardwoods.

I bit my lip to keep from cursing or laughing.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I was putting Mommy's star.” In his chubby fist was a broken, six-pointed star. We typically celebrated both Hanukkah and Christmas so that Hudson and Libby had their family's traditions incorporated into Escher's and mine.

“But it broked.” Fast tears tumbled down his cheeks as his lip quivered. “I broked it!”

“That's okay. We'll make a new one,” Escher said from the kitchen door. He shot me an apologetic look—my sixteen-

year-old had said he'd watch his three-year-old brother for an hour so that I could turn in my semester's grades.

He dropped to his knees and patted Hudson's back. The two of them had the same dark hair and light eyes—most people thought they were biological brothers. I loved that, just as I loved how easily Escher had accepted Hudson and Libby into our lives.

We'd moved back into the bungalow I owned near Penn in January, where I'd used the second half of my sabbatical year to woo Libby into marrying me. We'd had a small, private ceremony in May where Escher was my best man, and Hudson was our ring bearer.

The pictures were way cuter than the circus Hudson brought to the event. I smiled, remembering the little fiend's ability to get into literally everything. He still did.

"I'll get the mop," Escher said. He must be feeling guilty. The kid still hated chores.

I sighed at the mess. "You boys go on. I'll pick up the mess."

"No," Hudson attempted to steady himself. "I make a mess. I clean it up. Right, Esch?"

"That's it, my man." Escher fist-bumped Hudson's much smaller fist, and I again wanted to groan and laugh, even as frustration and love blossomed bigger in my heart. Much as I loved my boys, they caused all kinds of mayhem.

After a few swipes with the mop and Hudson's excited squeals as Escher and I straightened the tree, I got Hudson settled at the table, making a new star out of clay.

I picked up the ornaments that had tumbled off and began rehanging them, glad we'd gotten plastic and other non-



breakable ones. Escher came in and took a couple from the pile.

“When’s Mom going to be home?”

I glanced at the clock. “Soon.” I still needed to finish grading and start dinner—my job on Tuesday nights.

Escher shot me a squint-eyed look when the side door to the garage slammed, and Libby called out a greeting. She set down her stuff just in time to catch the counter behind her as Hudson slammed into her knees, already talking a mile a minute about his day’s adventures.

“Um, yeah, so sorry about leaving him alone,” Escher said to me with a hang-dog look. “I had to pee, then I thought I’d grab a snack.”

I shook my head, and a reluctant chuckle poured out. “It’s a good thing he’s so sweet because he’s a holy terror.”

“Yeah, Hudson is the best, and the worst, rolled into one,” Escher said. “I’m going to miss him being so little.”

Libby had picked Hudson up, and he rested his head on her shoulder, his clay-caked hand in her hair. I shook my head. Our lives were a lot more interesting now that Hudson was a preschooler.

“No, you won’t,” Libby said.

I frowned, surprised she’d contradicted Escher. She was typically a good listener and much more patient than me, so her comment was out of character.

“Yeah, I will,” Escher said, a belligerent frown settling his dark brown eyebrows low.

She handed Escher a gift bag and then set Hudson on the couch with one for him. She brought me a third, dangling it

from her finger.

“I’m not picking a fight, I promise,” Libby said with a soft smile for Escher. “I know it’s close to Christmas, but I just *can’t* wait until then.” She beamed up at me—the same smile she’d worn when I proposed. I’d seen that megawatt grin twice more: the day I married her, and the day I asked to adopt Hudson.

“Go on. You two need to catch up,” she said, making a hurry-up motion. “Hudson’s nearly got his out.”

We each opened our package.

I blinked back tears to read the shirt again. “Really?”

She nodded, her expression filled with joy. I picked her up and spun her around, ignoring Escher’s good-natured groan about diapers and babysitting. I kissed her softly as I set her back on her feet.

“When do I get to meet this little guy?”

“In about seven and a half months,” Libby said. “I have my first doctor’s appointment next week.”

“Do you think you’ll have a girl?” Escher asked, excitement sparking in his eyes. “I always wanted a sister.”

Libby’s eyes gleamed with happiness as she smiled at him. Their relationship was easy, and I loved that they loved and respected each other’s place in my life straight from the beginning. “I think we should ask Santa.”

“I want a sister, too! I help!” Hudson said, climbing down from the couch and running toward us.

“Aw, man, this is *epic!*” Escher hugged us both, jumping up and down. “I can’t believe I get to be a big brother again.”

Hudson jumped on my feet, his big brother shirt trailing off his forehead where he'd put it on.

Joy and contentment welled up in my chest, and I pressed a kiss to each of my loves, cuddling Hudson close for a moment until he remembered his half-finished star. Once he settled back at the table, and we'd finished putting the ornaments on the tree, I ordered some Thai food, which Escher volunteered to pick up. He'd just gotten his driver's license, which was both freeing and terrifying...so, pretty much like all of parenting.

Then, I held my gorgeous wife on the couch as she told me about her day at the start-up she'd founded last year.

And once again, I realized how very much I adored this life we'd created together.

THE END

If you love a sweet-but-sexy hero who finds lovely with a smart, sometimes feisty woman, please check out [Another Charge](#), the first book in my Wildcatters Hockey series.

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My lovely readers: well, clearly, without *you*, none of this would be possible. The fact that you trust me with your time is the greatest compliment. Thank you so, so much.

## *About the Author*

USA Today bestseller Alexa Padgett's books have garnered accolades from prestigious organizations, including *Kirkus Reviews*, National Indie Excellence Awards, and *Publishers Weekly*.

Alexa spent a good part of her youth traveling. From Budapest to Belize, Calgary to Coober Pedy, she soaked in the myriad smells, sounds, and feels of these gorgeous places, wishing she could live in them all—at least for a while. And she does in her books.

She lives in New Mexico with her husband, children, and Great Pyrenees pup, Ash. When not writing, schlepping, or volunteering, she can be found in her tiny kitchen, channeling her inner Barefoot Contessa.

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By making sure you're on Alexa's list, you'll hear about all the new releases, monthly giveaways, and other cool stuff (currently I'm starting an exclusive NL-only short story).

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